●谷川 流

兵庫県在住。2003年、第8回スニーカー大賞〈大賞〉を本作『涼宮ハルヒの憂鬱』で受賞し、デビューを果たす。また、本作と同時に、電撃文庫より『学校を出よう！』も刊行された。趣味はバイクと麻雀。人生自転車操業中。今一番欲しいモノは心の余裕と別の人格。

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The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi

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Prologue

When did I stop believing in Santa Claus? In truth, this sort of silly question holds no real significance for me. However, if you were to ask me when I stopped believing that the old man wearing the red costume was Santa, then I can confidently say: I have never believed in Santa, ever. I knew that the Santa who appeared at my preschool Christmas party was a fraud, and now that I think about it, every one of my classmates shared the same look of disbelief watching our teacher pretend to be Santa. Although I had never seen Mommy kissing Santa Claus, I was already wise enough to be suspicious about the existence of an old man who worked only on Christmas Eve.

However, it took me quite a bit longer to realize that the aliens, time-travelers, ghosts, monsters and espers in those effects-filled "good guys versus evil organization" cartoons didn't actually exist either. No, wait, I probably did realize, I just didn't want to admit it. Deep inside my heart I still wanted those aliens, time-travelers, ghosts, monsters, espers and evil organizations to suddenly appear. Compared to this boring, normal life of mine, the world of those flashy shows was much more exciting; I wanted to live in that world too!

I wanted to be the one who saved the girl kidnapped by aliens and imprisoned in a bowl-like fortress. I wanted to be the one who used my courage, intelligence and trusty laser gun to fight against villains from the future trying to change history for their own gain. I wanted to be someone who could banish demons and monsters with a single spell, battle against mutants or psychics from evil organizations, and engage in telepathic fights!

But wait, calm down. If I really were ever attacked by aliens or whatever, how could I ever possibly fight against them? I don't even have any special powers!

Well then, how about this: one day, a mysterious new student transfers to my class. Except he's really an alien or from the future, and he has telepathic abilities. When he gets into a fight with the bad guys, all I need to do is find a way to get involved in his war. He'll handle all the fighting and I can just be his flunky sidekick. Oh my god, this is great, I am so clever!

Or maybe, if that doesn't work, how about this: one day, a mysterious power inside me awakens, something like a telekinetic or psychic ability. I discover that a lot of other people in this world also have similar powers, and then some sort of paranormal society recruits me. I'll become part of this organization and protect the world against evil mutants.

Unfortunately, reality is surprisingly cruel… No one got transferred to my class. I've never seen a UFO. When I went to places that were rumored to be haunted, nothing showed up. Two hours of intense staring didn't make my pencil move a single millimeter, and glaring at my classmate's head didn't reveal his thoughts to me either. I couldn't help but get depressed at how normal the laws of physics were. I began to stop watching for UFOs and paying attention to paranormal TV shows because I finally convinced myself it was impossible. I even reached a point where I only had a sense of nostalgia for those things.

1 Alpha Centauri is the closest star system beside our own Sun, 4.39 light-years away.

After junior high, I completely grew out of that fantasy world and became utterly grounded in reality. Nothing happened in 1999, even though I kept hoping, just a bit, that something would; mankind hadn't returned to the moon or gone beyond it. I suppose, from the way things are looking, that I'll be long dead before you can book a round trip from Earth to Alpha Centauri[1].

With those sorts of pedestrian thoughts in my mind, I became a normal, carefree senior high student. That is, until the day I met Suzumiya Haruhi.

Chapter 1

And so, I entered the senior high school in my area. At first, I regretted this decision as my new school sat on top of a very high hill. Even during spring, students would become hot and sweaty just from climbing the steep road—clearly, my intention of "going to school leisurely" was not going to work. Every time I remembered this, along with the fact that I would have to repeat the same procedure every day for the next three years, I became tired and depressed. I overslept a bit today. Perhaps that's why I walked so much faster, and perhaps that was why I was so tired then. I could have woken up ten minutes earlier, but, as all of you know, you sleep best right before it's time to get up. I didn't want to waste that precious 10 minutes, so I gave up on the thought, which meant that I would need to repeat this early exercise for the next three years. This was just too depressing.

That was the reason for my lone grim face in the time-wasting entrance ceremony. Everyone else had the "starting a new journey" look on their face; you know, the unique "hopeful, yet filled with uncertainty" look that every new student wears when they enter a new school. For me, this was not the case — a lot of old classmates from my old junior high school were also coming to this school. To cap it off, a few of my friends were also here. Thus, I didn't look as worried, or excited, as other people.

The guys were wearing sport jackets, and the girls were wearing the sailor uniform. Wow, that's a pretty weird combination. Maybe the snore-inducing principal giving a speech on the stage had some sort of fetish for sailor uniforms. As I was thinking about these useless things, the idiotic ceremony finally ended. I, along with my not-so-willing new classmates, entered the 1-5 classroom.

Our homeroom teacher, Okabe-sensei, with his practiced-for-an-hour-in-front-of-a-mirror smile, walked to the front of the class and gave a self-introduction. He first said that he was a PE teacher, and was the managing teacher for the handball team. Then he moved on to stuff like how, back when he was in university, he used to play on the handball team, and even won the championship, and that this school seriously lacked handball players, so whoever entered the team would become a regular instantly. And then he said stuff like how handball was the most interesting sport in the world and what-have-you. Just when I thought that he would never finish, he suddenly blurted out:

"Now, let's introduce ourselves!"

This kind of thing was pretty common, though, so I wasn't surprised.

One by one, the people on the left side of the class started to introduce themselves. They raised their hand, then announced their name, the name of their old school, and other trivial stuff, such as a hobby or favorite food. Some people mumbled their way through it, a few had some pretty interesting introductions, while some tried to tell lame jokes that lowered the room's temperature by a substantial degree. As the different people introduced themselves, my turn was approaching. I'm starting to get nervous! Everyone should understand how I'm feeling right now, right?

After I managed to finish my carefully thought-out, minimal-length introduction without stumbling over my words too much, I sat down, feeling the relief you get after having finished something unpleasant but necessary. The person behind me stood up for her turn and—ah, I probably won't forget this for the rest of my life—said the words that would be the topic of conversation for a long time.

"My name is Suzumiya Haruhi. I graduated from East Junior High."

Up to this point the introduction was still normal, so I didn't even bother turning around to look at her. I just stared at the front and listened to her crisp voice.

"Normal humans don't interest me. If anyone here is an alien, a time traveler, slider, or an esper, then come find me! That is all."

Upon hearing that, I couldn't help but turn around.

She had long and slender black hair. Her cute face was filled with daring and challenge as the rest of the class stared at her. Her seriousness and determination shone through her glinting eyes and long eyebrows. Her small lips were tightly pursed. This was my first impression of this girl.

I still remember how gleaming her white throat was— standing there was an astounding beauty.

Haruhi, with her provocative eyes, scanned the class slowly, stopped to glare at me (I had my mouth wide open), and then sat down without so much as a smile.

Was this a gag?

At that moment I believe everyone's mind was filled with question marks, and that everyone was confused as to what their reaction should be. "Should I laugh?" No one knew.

Well, judging by the conclusion, it wasn't a gag nor a laughing matter, as Haruhi never said any joke.

She is always serious.

This is based on hindsight—it can't be wrong.

After the fairies of silence danced around the classroom for thirty-something seconds, the homeroom teacher, with some hesitation, signaled the next person to continue, and the tense atmosphere lifted.

That is how we met.

How unforgettable. I really want to believe that this was all a coincidence.

After she grabbed everyone's attention on the first day, Haruhi reverted to being an innocent high school girl.

This was the calm before the storm! I finally understand it all now.

Anyway, everyone in this school came from one of the four junior high schools in the city—people with average grades. This, of course, includes East Junior High; therefore there should be people in the class who graduated with Haruhi, who knew what her silence symbolized. Unfortunately, I did not know any former East Junior High students, thus no one could explain to me how serious the situation was. Consequently, a few days after that explosive introduction, I did something I would never forget—I tried to talk to her before class.

My dominoes of misfortune had begun to fall, and I was the person who pushed the first block!

You see, when Haruhi sits quietly in her seat, she looks just like a normal, cute girl, so I planned to sit right in front of her to get close to her. I actually thought this would work. How naive of me. Someone please beat some sense into me.

Of course, I started the conversation with that incident.

"Hey."

I casually turned my head around, with that airy smile all over my face.

"The stuff you said in your intro, how much of it was serious?"

With her arm crossed on her chest, lips sealed together, Suzumiya Haruhi kept her posture, then stared right into my eyes.

"What 'stuff in my intro'?"

"The stuff about the aliens and all that."

"Are you an alien?"

She looked very serious.

"… No, but—"

"If you are not, then what do you want?"

"…No, nothing."

"Then don't talk to me. You are wasting my time."

Her glare was so cold that I found myself stuttering “sorry” before realizing it. Suzumiya Haruhi then removed her glare from me disdainfully, and started to frown at the blackboard.

I was going to whip back a line or two, but I couldn’t think of anything good to say. Thankfully, at that moment the homeroom teacher came into the classroom and saved me.

I turned my head back to my desk damply, and noticed that a few people were looking at me with a look of great interest on their face. This, of course, made me feel very annoyed. After I stared back at them, however, I noticed that they all had the same feeble expression on their faces. Some even nodded at me with sympathy.

As I said, at first I felt very irritated, but later on I learned that all those people graduated from East Junior High.

Given that my first contact with Haruhi had ended horribly, I figured that I should keep my distance from her for now, for safety’s sake. With that in mind, a week passed by.

But, just as I was still part of this class, there were always people who wanted to talk to the eyebrow-locking scowling-mouthed Haruhi.

Most of the people were those fussy girls; the second they see that a fellow female classmate is becoming isolated they try to be kind and help the girl. This is a good thing, but they should at least check their target beforehand!

“Hi, did you see that tv show last night? The 9 o’clock one.”

“No.”

“Eh, why?”

“I don’t know.”

“You should try it. Even if you started in the middle you wouldn’t be lost. Do you need me to go over the previous story for you?”

“You are annoying!”

That’s how it went.

It would be much better if she could just answer no with her poker face. But no, she had to show her impatience in both her expression and her voice. This just made her victim believe that they did something wrong. At the end he/she could only say “I see… then I’ll just…”, and ask themselves “What did I say wrong?” and whimper away.

Don’t be so sad; you didn’t say anything wrong. The problem is with Suzumiya Haruhi’s brain, not yours.

Even though I didn’t mind eating alone, I didn’t want others to think that I was a loner when everyone else was happily eating their lunch with their friends. That’s why, even though I didn’t care if others misunderstood, I ate my lunch together with my junior high school classmate Kunikida and an East Junior High graduate named Taniguchi, who sat close to me.

We started to talk about Haruhi.

“Did you try to talk to Suzumiya?” Taniguchi asked innocently. I nodded.

“And then she said some weird stuff and you didn’t know how to react?”

“That’s right!”

Taniguchi put his sliced boiled egg into his mouth, chewed, and said:

“If you’re interested in her, I won’t mince words. All I can advise you is to give up! You should know by now that she’s not normal.”

“I was in her class three years in a row; I know how she is.”

He used this line as the beginning of his speech.

“She always does incredibly baffling things. I thought she would at least try to control herself after she got into senior high; apparently she hasn’t. You heard her introduction speech, right?”

“You mean the alien stuff?”

Kunikida, who was busy picking bones out of his fried fish, had butted in.

“Yeah that. Even back in junior high she always said and did lots of weird stuff. For example there was this school vandalization incident!”

“What happened?”

“You know that one tool where you use plaster dust to draw field lines, right? What’s it called… Anyway, she sneaked into school at night and, with that thing, drew a huge huge symbol in the middle of the field.”

Taniguchi had a mischievous smile on his face— he was probably remembering the incident.

“That was so shocking. I went to school early that morning, and all I saw were big circles and triangles. I couldn’t figure out what they were supposed to be, so I went up to the fourth floor to get a bird’s eye view. That didn’t help— I still didn’t know what that symbol was.”

“Ah, I think I saw that before. Didn’t the newspaper have a story on it? It even had a helicopter view of it! The symbol looked like a broken Nazca pictogram,” Kunikida said.

I don’t remember hearing about that before.

“I saw the article, I saw it. The headline was something like ‘Mystery Vandal Strikes Junior High At Night,’ right? Well, care to guess who pulled that stunt?”

“Don’t tell me it’s her.”

“She admitted it herself. There’s no mistaking it. Naturally, she got called into the principal’s office. Every teacher was there, questioning her on why she did it.”

“Why did she do it, then?”

“I don’t know,” Taniguchi answered flatly, as he tried to swallow a mouthful of rice.

“I heard she refused to say anything. Of course, when you’re getting glared at by her, you tend to give up on whatever you’re planning. Someone said that she drew the symbol to call out to UFOs, others said that it was a magic symbol and was used in summoning monsters, or that she was trying to open a portal to different worlds, et cetera… There were many speculations, but as long as the perpetrator refuses to talk, we may never know if those rumors are true or not. To this day it’s still a mystery.”

For some reason, the picture of Haruhi, with her no-nonsense look, busy laying the lines in the middle of the school field at night, floated into my mind. She definitely prepared the drawing tools and the limestone powders beforehand in the storage room; maybe she even bought a flashlight! Under its dim yellow light Suzumiya Haruhi looked very sober and tragic… OK, this was just my imagination.

But truth be told Suzumiya Haruhi was probably really doing it to summon UFOs or monsters, or even a dimensional portal. She probably worked on it the whole night in the field, but nothing showed up, and all she was left with was that beat down feeling, I thought to myself.

“That’s not the only thing she did!”

Taniguchi continued to finish his lunch.

2 An O-fuda (お札) is a Shinto talisman where an inscription is made on a piece of paper, wood or metal. Such charms are used to bring good luck, ward off or contain evil spirits, or for protection from illness.

“Once I came to the classroom in the morning and discovered that all the desks were moved out to the corridor, or that there were printed stars on the school roof. Another time she was going around the school putting O-fuda[2] all over the place… you know, those Chinese ones where you put the paper talisman on a vampire’s forehead. I just can’t understand her.”

That’s right, Suzumiya Haruhi was not inside the classroom right then, or else we wouldn’t have been having this conversation. But then again, even if she did hear us, she probably wouldn’t have cared. Usually, Suzumiya Haruhi left the classroom immediately after fourth period, then came back right before the fifth period. She didn’t carry a lunch box, so I had assumed that she went to the cafeteria to enjoy her lunch; but it doesn’t take the whole hour to eat lunch, does it? Furthermore, at the end of every period, she disappeared. Where did she go anyway…?

“But she’s very popular with the guys!”

Taniguchi piped in:

“She’s cute, athletic, and smart. Even though she is peculiar, if she keeps her mouth shut, she’s actually not bad.”

“Where did you learn all this gossip?” Kunikida asked, with his lunch box twice as full as Taniguchi’s.

“There was a period of time where she switched boyfriends non-stop. From what I heard, the longest relationship lasted a week, the shortest one ended 5 minutes after the confession. In addition, the only reason Suzumiya gave for dumping her boyfriends was ‘I don’t have time to socialize with normal humans.’”

Taniguchi seemed to be speaking from experience. After he noticed my stare, he became a bit flustered.

“I heard this from other people! Honest! For some reason, she wouldn’t turn down a confession. By the third year, everyone understood; so no one wanted to confess to her anymore. I have a funny feeling that history will repeat itself in senior high. So I am warning you now: give up. This is coming from someone who was in the same class as her.”

Say whatever you want, I was not interested in her in that way.

Taniguchi put his empty lunch-box back into his bag, and let out a sinister giggle.

“If I had to choose one, I would choose her, Asakura Ryouko.”

Taniguchi nodded his chin towards a group of girls a few desks away. In the middle of the conversing group, with a rosy smile on her face, was Asakura Ryouko.

“Judging from my analysis, she definitely enters the ‘Top Three Cutest First Year Girls’ list.”

“You have every single first year girl in this school checked out?”

“I group girls into A to D categories and, believe me, I only remember the names of the A girls. You only get to go through high school life once— I want mine to be as happy as possible.”

“Then that Asakura Ryouko is an A then?” Kunikida asked.

“She is AA+! Come on, just look at her face, her personality must be first class.”

Even ignoring Taniguchi’s egoistic comments, Asakura Ryouko was quite a different kind of cute girl than Suzumiya Haruhi was.

First of all, she was very pretty; plus she always let off a smile-like caring impression. Second, her personality did seem to match Taniguchi’s description. These days no one dared to talk to Suzumiya Haruhi anymore, except for Asakura Ryouko. No matter how harsh Suzumiya Haruhi was, Asakura Ryouko still tried to talk to her from time to time. She was so passionate that she almost acted like the class monitor. Third, from the way she answered teachers’ questions in class alone, you could see that she was very smart. She always answered the questions correctly — in the eyes of the teachers she was probably a model student. To top it off, she was extremely popular with the girls. The term had only been going for a week, and she was already well on her way to being the center of the female students in the class. It was as though she had fallen from the sky and had been born with extreme attraction in mind!

Compared to the often scowling, science fiction-obsessed Suzumiya Haruhi, the choice was obvious. Then again, these two candidates were both probably too high up the hill for our hero Taniguchi to climb. No way was he going to get either of them.

It was still April then, and, at that time, Suzumiya was actually behaving quite nicely. To me, this was quite a relaxing month. At the very least, there would be a month to go before Haruhi started going astray.

But, even during this time, I’d observed some of Haruhi’s eccentric behaviors.

Why would I say that?

Clue #1: She changed her hairstyle every day. Furthermore, judging from my observation, there was some sort of a pattern going on. On Monday, Haruhi would come to school with her long hair down, without tying it up whatsoever. On the next day, she would tie it up in a ponytail. As much as I hate to admit it, that hair style did look good on her. Then, she would tie two ponytails on the next day, and three ponytails the day after; by Friday, she would have four ribbon-tied ponytails on her head. Her actions were really enigmatic!

Monday = 0, Tuesday = 1, Wednesday = 2…

As the day of the week increased, so would the number of her ponytails; by next Monday, the whole process would start again. I couldn't see why she was doing it. Following the previous logic, she should have had six ponytails on Sunday… I suddenly wanted to see her Sunday hairstyle.

Clue #2: For PE, classes 1-5 and 1-6 would combine and have PE together, with the boys and girls separated. When we changed clothes, the girls would go to the 1-5 classroom, and the boys would go to the 1-6 classroom; meaning at the end of the previous period, the guys from our class (1-5) would move to the other room to change.

Unfortunately, Haruhi totally ignored the guys in our class, and removed her sailor uniform before the guys had left.

It was as if, to her, the guys were pumpkins or potato sacks, and she couldn't care less. Without any expression, she would throw her uniform onto the desk and start to get into her sweatshirt.

At that moment, Asakura Ryouko would drive the goggle-eyed, frozen guys, myself included, out of the classroom.

According to rumors, the girls, with Asakura Ryouko as their leader, tried to talk Haruhi out of doing that, but to no avail. Every PE class, Haruhi would ignore the rest of the class and take her uniform off without so much as a glance. And so, we guys were asked to leave the classroom the second the bell rang— at the request of Asakura Ryouko.

But seriously, Haruhi has a really great figure… argh, this isn't the time to say that kind of thing.

Clue #3: At the end of every block, Haruhi would go AWOL. When the school bell came rolling around, she would grab her backpack and shoot out of the classroom. Logically, I thought that she went straight back to her house; I would never have thought that she would go and participate in all the clubs in the school. One day, you would see her passing balls in the Basketball Club, and the next you would see her sewing a pillow case in the Sewing Club. By the following day, you would see her waving her stick in the Hockey Club. I think she also joined the Baseball Club. So, basically, she had participated in every sport club in our school. All the clubs tried to persuade her into joining them of course, but she turned them all down. Her explanation was: "It is annoying for me to do the same club activity everyday." At the end of the day, she didn't join any clubs.

What is that girl trying to pull?

From this alone, news of a "weird first year girl" spread throughout the school almost instantly. Within a month, there was not a single person who didn't know who Suzumiya Haruhi was. Fast forwarding to May, people may still not have known who the principal was, but Suzumiya Haruhi was a household name.

So, with all this stuff going on—and Haruhi always the cause—May arrived.

Though I personally think that destiny is even less believable than the Loch Ness monster, if destiny, at some unknown place, is actively influencing human lives, my wheel of fate had probably begun to turn. Conceivably, in some remote mountain there was probably some old guy who was busy rewriting my destiny.

After the end of the Golden Week holiday, I walked to school, not sure what day of the week it was. The unnaturally sunny May weather blasted onto my skin and made me soaked with sweat— the steep hill didn't seem to end either. Just what is it that the Earth wants? Is it suffering from yellow fever or something?

"Hey, Kyon."

From behind, somebody clapped me on the shoulder. It was Taniguchi.

His blazer hung slovenly on his shoulders, his necktie was wrinkled and skewed to one side.

"Where did you go for Golden Week?"

"I took my little sister to see my grandma in the countryside."

"How dull."

"Fine, what did you do, then?"

"Part-time job all the way."

"You don't look like that kind of person."

"Kyon, you are in senior high now— why do you still bring your little sister to see your grandpa and grandma? You gotta at least look like a senior high student."

By the way, Kyon would be me. My aunt was the one who first called me that. A few years ago, my long-time-no-see aunt suddenly said to me "My goodness, Kyon has grown so big!" My sister thought it was funny and also started to call me Kyon. After that the rest is history— my friends, upon hearing my sister calling me Kyon, decided to follow her lead. From that day on, my nickname became Kyon. Damn it, my sister used to call me "Onii-chan"!

"It is a tradition of my family's to have a cousin gathering during Golden Week," I answered as I climbed the hill.

The sweating sensation made me feel uncomfortable.

Taniguchi, long winded as always, boasted how he had met some cute girls at his workplace, and how he planned to use the money he saved to go on dates and such. Frankly, topics like what dreams people have, or how amazing or cute someone's pet is, are in my book, some of the dullest topics in the world.

As I listened to Taniguchi's date schedule (apparently he wasn't stopped by little problems such as how no one was going with him), we arrived at the school gate.

Suzumiya Haruhi was already sitting behind my seat staring at the outside when I entered the classroom. She had two bun-like hair clippers on her head; I guess today is Wednesday. After sitting down— for some reason which I do not know, the only explanation being that I was going nuts, before I realized it— I found myself once again talking to Suzumiya Haruhi.

"Do you change your hair style each day because of the aliens?"

Like a robot, Suzumiya Haruhi turned her face slowly towards me, and stared at me with her dead serious expression. It was pretty scary, actually.

"When did you notice?"

Her tone was so cold that it was as though she was talking to a rock on the side of the road.

I paused for a while to think about it.

"Hmm… for a while."

"Really?"

Haruhi put her chin on her palm, looking irritated.

"I think that each day of the week gives off a different image."

This was the first time we'd had a proper conversation!

3 Haruhi's choice of color is based on the Japanese weekday naming system. For example, Wednesday in Japanese is suiyobi, literally water-day, and therefore is blue. Friday, Kinyobi, or gold-day, is gold.

"For color: Monday is yellow, Tuesday is red, Wednesday is blue, Thursday is green, Friday is gold, Saturday is brown, and Sunday is white."[3]

I can sort of understand what she is trying to say.

"Then that means if we use numbers to represent the color, Monday is zero and Sunday is six, right?"

"That's correct."

"But shouldn't Monday be one?"

“Who asked for your opinion?”

“… Yeah, right.”

Seemingly unsatisfied by my answer, Haruhi scowled at me. I just sat there uncomfortably and let time slip by.

“Have I seen you somewhere before? A long time ago?”

“Don’t think so.”

After I answered, Okabe-sensei lightly entered the classroom, and our first conversation ended.

Even though our first conversation is nothing to write home about, this could become the changing point I have been looking for!

Then again, the only chance I could talk to Haruhi was the bit of time before homeroom session, as she’s usually not in the room during recess. But as I sit in front of her, I am fairly certain that my chances of talking to her are far greater than those of others.

But the thing that shocked me the most is that Haruhi actually answered me properly. I originally thought that she would go like, “You are annoying, moron, shut up! Whatever!” I guess that I’m just as weird as her, for actually finding the guts to go and talk to her.

Therefore when I came to school the next day and discovered that instead of tying three ponytails, Haruhi had cut her long and slender hair short, I felt quite depressed.

The waist length hair has been shortened to shoulder length. I mean, even though the hairstyle does suit her, she cut her hair the day after I talked to her about it! She is obviously looking down on me. What the hell!

When I asked for her reason, however:

“No reason.”

She answered with her trademark irritated tone but didn’t show any sort of special expression. She was not going to tell me the reason.

But I expected that, so that’s all right.

“Did you really try to join all the clubs?”

From that day on, talking to her using the bit of time before the home room session became my daily routine. Of course, if I didn't try to start the conversation, Haruhi would show no sign of reaction. Another thing is that if I talk to her about how last night's TV show was, or how the weather is, etc.— those she deemed as "idiotic topics"— she would just ignore me. Knowing that, I carefully picked the conversation topic whenever I talked to her.

"Is there a club that is more fun than the others? I'd like to consider joining some myself."

"None." Haruhi answered flatly. "Absolutely none."

She emphasizes this again, then slowly let out a breath. Is she sighing?

"I thought that high school would be a bit better. In the end it's the same as mandatory education. Nothing changes at all. Looks like I joined the wrong school."

Miss, what criteria did you employ when you decided which school to attend?

"Sports clubs and cultural clubs are all the same. If only there were some unique clubs in school…"

"Well, what gave you the right to decide if other clubs are normal or not?"

"Shut up. If I like a club, then it's unique; otherwise it's plain."

"Really? I knew you would say that."

"Hmph!"

She turned her face away in annoyance, marking the end of the day's conversation.

Another day:

"I overheard something the other day… It's not something important anyway… Did you really dump all your boyfriends?"

"Why do I need to hear this from you again?"

She brushed her hair by her shoulders, and stared at me with her bright black eyes. God, other than being expressionless, this angry expression seems to appear often on her face.

"Did that Taniguchi tell you? God, I can't believe that I'm in the same class as that idiot even after I graduated junior high. He isn't one of those stalking psychos, is he?"

"I don't think so," I thought.

“I don’t know what you heard, but it doesn’t matter, most of it is true anyway.”

“Isn’t there someone out there you want to have a serious relationship with?”

“Absolutely no one!”

Total dismissal seems to be her motto.

“Every single one of them is a moron, I just can’t engage in any serious relationship with them. Each one of them would ask me to meet him at the train station on Sunday, then for sure we would go to movies, amusement park, or to a ball game. The first time we eat together would always be a lunch date then we would rush off to a cafe to drink tea. At the end of the day they would always say ‘see you tomorrow’!”

“I don’t see anything wrong with that!” I thought personally; but I didn’t dare say that out loud. If Haruhi says it’s bad, then it must be bad for her.

“Then, without fail, they would confess over the phone. What the hell! This is a sober subject, at least tell me face-to-face!!”

I can sympathize with those guys. Making such an important— to them, at least— confession to someone who looks at you like you are a worm would probably make anyone feel uneasy. They lost their nerve just from seeing your expression! I’m imagining what those guys were thinking as I respond to Haruhi.

“Hmm, you are right. I would ask the girl out and tell her directly.”

“Who the hell cares about you!”

What the… Did I say something wrong again?

“The problem is, are all the boys in this world such dim-witted creatures? I have been agitated by this question since junior high.”

Now it’s not any better is it!

“Then, what kind of boy would you consider ‘interesting’? Is it going to be aliens after all?”

“I am fine with aliens or similar things as long as they are not normal. Be they male or female.”

“Why do you always insist on something other than human?”

When I blabbed that out Haruhi looked at me with disdain.

“Because humans are no fun at all!”

“That… maybe you are right.”

Even I can’t counter Haruhi’s idea; if it turns out that this cute transfer student is half earthling and half alien, even I would think that’s cool. If Taniguchi, currently sitting next to me and spying on Haruhi and me, is a detective from the future, it would be even cooler. If Asakura Ryouko, who for some reason keeps smiling at me, has any sort of supernatural power, then my school life would be as exciting as one can get.

But none of it is possible— no aliens, time travelers, or supernatural powers exist in this world. Okay, let’s say they do exist. They wouldn’t just appear right in front of us humble citizens and say, “Hello, I’m actually an alien.”

“THAT’S WHY!”

Haruhi suddenly stood up and knocked her chair down, causing everyone to turn and look at her.

“THAT’S WHY I AM WORKING SO HARD!!”

“Sorry I am late!”

The always-optimistic Okabe-sensei, who is pretty out of breath, rushed into the classroom. When he saw the whole class looking at Haruhi standing, her fists clenched, eyes fixed at the ceiling, he became just as surprised and just stood there.

“Er… Homeroom is about to start!”

Haruhi sat down immediately and glared at the corner of her desk. Phew!

I turned around, the whole class followed suit and turned their heads as well. Then Okabe-sensei, obviously disoriented by the commotion, wobbled to the stage and let out a soft cough.

“I apologize for being late. Eh… Then let’s begin!”

He repeats again, and the class atmosphere finally reverts to normal— even though this is the sort of atmosphere that Haruhi hates the most!

Maybe, life is just like that?

But, to tell you the truth, deep inside my heart I’m really envious of Haruhi’s attitude towards life.

She still has the aspiration that she’ll meet someone from the supernatural world that I abandoned long ago, and she enthusiastically tries to achieve her dream. If sitting around waiting is not going to achieve anything, let’s call them ourselves! This is why Haruhi does things like

drawing white lines on the school field, painting symbols on the school roof, and pasting cursed paper talismans everywhere.

Sigh!

I don't know when Haruhi started to do weird stuff that made others mistake her as an occultist. Waiting achieves nothing, so why not perform some weird ceremonies to call them out? At the end of the day, however, nothing happened. Maybe that's why Haruhi always has that "damn-the-whole-world" look on her face…?

"Hey, Kyon."

After class, Taniguchi, with his mystified face, tried to corner me. Taniguchi, you look like a total moron with that expression of yours!

"Be quiet! I don't care what you say. Anyway what kind of magical spell did you cast?"

"What magical spell?"

Highly advanced technology is indistinguishable from magic! I remembered this proverb as I ask Taniguchi back. He then pointed his finger at Haruhi's now vacant seat.

"This is the first time I've seen Suzumiya talk to a person for so long! What did you guys talk about?"

That, ah, what did we talk about? I just asked her some normal questions, that's all.

"How very shocking!"

Taniguchi sarcastically put on an in-awe expression, then Kunikida popped up from behind Taniguchi.

"Kyon has a history of liking strange girls."

Hey, don't say things that'll create a misunderstanding.

"It doesn't matter if Kyon likes strange girls. What I can't understand is why Suzumiya would talk to you? I don't get it at all."

"Maybe Kyon is as weird as her?"

"Probably. I mean you can't expect someone with a nickname like Kyon to be normal."

Stop calling me Kyon, Kyon, Kyon! Rather than being called by that stupid nickname, just use my real name! At the very least I wanted to hear my sister call me "Onii-chan"!

“I want to know too.”

The voice of a cheerful girl came out of nowhere. I lifted my head, and of course, saw Asakura Ryouko’s innocently smiling face.

“I tried talking to Suzumiya-san a few times already but nothing came of it. Could you teach me how I should talk to her?”

I acted like I thought about this for a while; actually, I didn’t even think at all.

“I dunno.”

Upon hearing this, Asakura smiled.

“I am so relieved now. She can’t go on being isolated from her classmates like that, so it’s great that you’ve become her friend.”

Asakura Ryouko cares for her like a class monitor because, well, she is the class monitor. She was elected as the class monitor in our last lengthy homeroom session.

“Friend, huh?”

I shook my head uncertainly. Is it really like that? But, the only expression Haruhi gives me whenever I talk to her is a scowl!

“You need to continue helping Suzumiya-san so that she can get along with the class. We’re in the same class after all so we’re counting on you!”

Sigh, even if you say that, I don’t even know what I’m supposed to do!

“If there is anything I need to tell Suzumiya-san, I could just ask you to pass the message to her!”

No, wait! I’m not her spokesman!

“Please?” she asked sincerely, putting her palms together.

Faced with her request, I could only give vague responses like “erm” and “ahh…”. Asakura took that as a yes and showed her yellow-tulip-like smile, and then went back to the other girls. After seeing that the other girls were looking at me, my heart fell to the bottom of a canyon.

“Kyon, we are good friends right…?” Taniguchi asked, staring at me suspiciously.

“What the hell is going on here?”

Even Kunikida, with his eyes closed and arms crossed on his chest, nodded.

Oh my god! Why am I surrounded by a bunch of idiots?

It seems that someone decided that everyone in class needed to change their seats monthly. Therefore the class monitor Asakura wrote all the seat numbers onto little pieces of paper, placed them in a cookie tin, and let each of us draw from it. In the end I got the seat in the second to last row next to the window that overlooks the courtyard. Guess who took the last seat right behind me? That's right. It's the ever scowling Haruhi!

"Why hasn't something interesting happened yet?! Like little grade school kids disappearing one by one, or some teachers getting murdered inside a locked classroom?"

"Stop saying that kind of scary stuff!"

"I joined the Mystery Study Group."

"Oh? What happened?"

"It was so idiotic. Nothing interesting happened! Furthermore, all the club members are detective novel fans but there isn't anyone there that resembles a detective!"

"Isn't that normal?"

"I actually had hopes for the Supernatural Study Group."

"Really?"

"But they all turned out to be a bunch of occult maniacs. Does that sound fun to you?"

"Not really."

"Ah, man, this is too boring! Why doesn't this school have any decently interesting club?"

"Well, there's not much you can do about that."

"I thought after I graduated to senior high I would encounter some kick ass clubs! Sigh, this is like trying to go into the Major League but then you discover that the school you're attending doesn't even have a baseball team."

Haruhi looked as if she were some sort of banshee ready to go to a hundred Buddhist monasteries to lay some curses. She stared at the sky with disdain and let out a huge sigh.

Should I pity her?

I don't know what sort of clubs Haruhi likes. Maybe even she doesn't know the answer. She just wants to "do something interesting." What is "something interesting?" Does that involve solving a murder mystery? Searching for UFOs? Or exorcism? I think she has no idea either.

"I think it can't be helped if there aren't any."

I decided to express my opinion.

"Judging from the results, humans are usually content with their current states. Those who aren't, however, will try to invent or discover something to advance civilization. Someone wanted to fly so they invented airplanes. Someone wanted to travel easily so automobiles and trains were made. But, those things were created by people who possessed special talents. Only a genius can convert those imaginings into reality. We ordinary mortals should just live our lives fully. We shouldn't act impulsively just because we feel adventurous."

"Shut up."

Haruhi just cut off my rather excellent speech, or at least that's what I think, and turned her head the other direction. Looks like she's really moody right now. But then again, when isn't she? I am used to it already.

This girl probably doesn't care about anything— unless it involves supernatural powers that far surpasses reality. The world doesn't have those, however. Nope, really.

Long live the Laws of Physics! Thanks to you we humans can live in peace. Though Haruhi may cringe at this.

I am normal, right?

Something must have triggered it.

Maybe it's the above conversation?

Because I never saw it coming!

The warm sun made everyone in the classroom sleepy. Just as I was nodding my head and going to sleep, a powerful force suddenly exerted itself on my collar and pulled me backwards. Because the force was so strong, my head hit the corner of the desk behind me. Tears instantly came out of my eyes.

"What do you think you are doing!?"

I turned my head around madly and saw Haruhi, one hand still grabbing my collar, smiling a big smile that was as bright as the tropical sun— honestly, this is the first time I've seen her smile! If smiles can be measured in terms of temperature, then her smile was as hot as a tropical rain forest.

"I got it!"

Hey, don't spit on me!

"Why didn't I think of this before?"

Haruhi's eyes shone as brightly as the Albireo Alpha[4] star. She stared at me pointedly. Reluctantly, I asked:

4 Albireo is the third brightest star in the Cygnus constellation.

"What did you think up?"

"If it doesn't exist, I can just create one myself!"

"Create what?"

"A club!"

My head suddenly hurt and I don't think it had anything to do with my head hitting the desk a moment ago.

"Really? What an excellent idea. Can you let go of me now?"

"What's with your attitude? You should be happier!"

"About your idea, I'll talk to you about that later. For now I just want you to consider where we are, THEN you can share your joy with me. But first calm down okay?"

"What do you mean?"

"Class is still in session."

Haruhi finally let go of my collar. I pressed the numbing back of my head and turned around slowly. I noticed that the whole class looked totally awestruck. The freshly-graduated newbie English teacher, with her chalk in her hand, stared at me and looked as if she was ready to cry.

I signaled Haruhi to sit down quickly and shrugged towards the poor teacher.

Please continue with the lesson.

I heard Haruhi mumble about something and sat down unwillingly. The teacher then resumed her writing on the board…

Create a new club?

Hmmmm…

Don't tell me I'm already a member?

My aching cerebrum just serves to enhance my unease.

Chapter 2

From the results, my premonition had come true.

After class, Haruhi didn't disappear instantly from the classroom as usual. This time she forcefully took my hand and dragged me out of the classroom, through the corridors, up the stairs, and finally stopped in front of the door leading to the rooftop.

That door is usually locked, and the staircase above the fourth floor seems to have been used as a storage room by the Art Club. Giant canvases, near broken picture frames, statues of war gods with missing noses and such are all piled up in this little staircase, making what is supposed to be a narrow space even narrower.

What is she trying to do to me by bringing me here?

"I need your help."

Haruhi said this while grabbing my tie. With her sharp glare aimed at the lower part of my head, I got the feeling she was threatening me.

"Help you with what?"

I feigned ignorance.

"Help me make a new club!"

"OK, then tell me, why must I help you complete something that you just suddenly thought up?"

"Because I need to secure a room for the club as well as members, so you need to find out what paperwork needs to be done for the school."

She wasn't even listening. I cast off Haruhi's hand.

"What club are you trying to make?"

"It doesn't matter! What's important is to make a club first."

I really doubt that the school would let us form a club whose activities are unknown.

"Now listen! After school today, you go and find out what needs to be done, and I'll go and find a room for the club. Okay?"

'NO!'

If I had replied like that, I was sure I would be killed. While I was hesitating on how to answer, Haruhi had already turned and walked down the stairs, leaving a disoriented male student standing all alone on the dust-filled staircase.

"… I haven't even agreed to help…"

Sigh, saying this to a plaster statue is pointless. I could only drag my heavy feet, thinking about how I would explain all this to my curious classmates.

Requirements for organizing an "association":

Five members or more. A sponsor teacher, club name, chairperson for the club, and club activities/goals summary are required—which then requires approval from the Student Council Executive Committee. The club's activities must fit in with the school philosophy of creativity and vivaciousness. Based on the activities' records and results, the Executive Committee would debate on whether to promote the association into a "study group." Furthermore, as an association, the school will not provide any funding.

I didn't have to explicitly search for the requirements because they are all listed out on the back of the student handbook.

Members are easy; we can just find anyone to make up the numbers, so that won't be a problem. A sponsor teacher is harder to find, but I think I can manage that. As for the name, something inoffensive would do. And the chairperson for the club is, no doubt, Haruhi herself.

I am willing to bet, however, that our club activities/goals summary is definitely not going to agree with "creativity and vivaciousness."

That being said, it's not as if Haruhi is the kind of person who cares about the rules.

As the bell rang for the end of classes, Haruhi showed off her horrifyingly brutish strength by gripping my jacket's sleeve and pulling me out of our classroom at kidnapping speed. It took great effort to make sure that I didn't leave my school bag in the classroom.

"Where are we going?"

I asked because, well, I'm normal after all.

"The Club Room."

Haruhi, so full of energy that she was able to kick away the slow moving people in front of us, simply answered with a short sentence, then kept her mouth shut. Please, can you at least let go of my hand first?

After we exited the first floor hallway, we went into another building and up the stairs. We walked into a dark hallway and at its center, Haruhi stopped. Of course, I stopped too.

There is a door in front of us.

Literature Club

The crooked name tag is pasted on the door.

"Here it is."

Without even knocking, Haruhi opened the door and walked into the classroom without any consideration. Of course, I followed her inside.

The room is surprisingly large, or maybe it seems that way because it only contains a rectangular table, metal chairs, and a bookshelf. A few cracks on the ceiling and the walls showed how ancient the building is.

Just as if she came with the room, a girl was sitting alone on a metal chair, reading a very thick hardcover book.

"From now on this will be our club room."

Haruhi opened her arms and announced formally. Her face was shining with that energetic smile. 'If only she would show that smile in class…' despite that thought, I didn't dare to say it out loud.

"Wait a second, what is this place?"

"The Cultural and Arts club building. This place has art and music rooms for the Art Club and the Orchestra Club. Clubs and associations without a regular club room all hold their activities here in this building, known as the Old Complex. And this classroom belongs to the Literature Club."

"Then what about the Literature Club?"

"After all the third year students graduated this spring, the club had zero members. As no new members were recruited, the club was going to be canceled. By the way, she's a first year who's their only new member."

"Then they haven't been canceled yet!"

“Close enough! A club with only one member is the same as none.”

You idiot! Are you trying to take over other people’s club rooms? I took a quick look at the Literature Club girl.

She was a girl with glasses and short hair.

Haruhi was already this loud. The girl, however, didn’t even lift her head once. Apart from occasionally flipping the pages with her fingers, she appeared stationary, completely ignoring our presence. It seemed that this girl was strange as well!

I lowered my voice and asked Haruhi:

“Then what about that girl?”

“She said it doesn’t matter!”

“Really?”

“I asked her already at lunch time. I said I need her to lend me the room and she said ‘go ahead,’ as long as she can read her book here in peace. Now that you mention it, she is pretty weird.”

For you of all people to say that!

I observed the weird Literature Club girl carefully this time.

She had pale skin and an expressionless face. Her fingers were moving rhythmically like a robot. Just covering her pretty face, her short hair made one want to take off her glasses for a clearer view. She gave the impression of an inconspicuous puppet. In other words, a mysterious and expressionless weirdo!

Perhaps noticing my intrusive observation, the girl suddenly lifted her head and pushed the nose bridge of her glasses up with her fingers.

I saw her deep-colored eyes staring at me from under those lenses. Neither her eyes nor her lips showed any expression at all, almost like a mask. She was different from Haruhi—her face is the kind that fundamentally shows no sign of emotion.

“Nagato Yuki.”

Her tone suggested that her name would be forgotten by most people within three seconds of hearing it.

Nagato Yuki stared at me for a moment; then as if losing interest, she turned her attention back to her book.

“Say, Nagato-san,” I called out, “This girl here wants to use your club room for a yet-to-be-named club. Is this all right with you?”

“Yes.”

Nagato’s gaze never left her book once.

“But it might be troublesome for you.”

“It doesn’t matter.”

“Maybe you’ll even be evicted?”

“Please feel free.”

Even though she answered promptly, she showed no expression. It seemed to me that she really didn’t give a damn about it.

“Okay, then it’s decided,” Haruhi suddenly interrupted.

She sounded really hyper, giving me a bad feeling.

“From now on, we will meet in this room after class. Be sure to come! Or you’re as good as dead!”

She said with a smile like the blooming cherry blossoms. I reluctantly nodded my head.

Please, I don’t want to die yet!

So we’ve now found a club room, but there was absolutely no progress with the paperwork. We still hadn’t decided on a club name or what activities it intended to hold. I had asked Haruhi to sort these things out first, but she seemed to have other ideas.

“We can decide on all that later!” Haruhi declared loudly. “Right now the most important thing is to recruit members. We still need at least two more people.”

So, you’ve already counted the Literature Club girl in as well? You couldn’t possibly have treated Nagato Yuki as a mere club accessory, could you?

“Don’t worry about that. I’ll be able to gather people soon; I already have someone in mind.”

How can I not worry? My unease has become even more profound!

The next day after school, after turning down Taniguchi and Kunikida's offer to walk home with them, I reluctantly dragged my heavy feet and headed towards the club room.

Haruhi only said "You go first!" and rushed out of the classroom with a speed that the Athletic Club so badly needed. She was so fast that I wondered if she had added boosters in her shoes. I didn't know whether she was in a hurry to find new club members, or whether she was just plain excited that she had taken a step forward in meeting extraterrestrials?

On the other hand, I could only carry my bag, so I moved slowly towards the Literature Club room.

Entering the club room, I discovered Nagato Yuki already inside, sitting in the same position while reading her book. I slowly approached her, but as with yesterday her head was buried in the book, my presence ignored. Was the Literature Club a pure reading club? Why else would she be reading all the time?

Silence in the classroom.

"… What are you reading?"

I asked, not being able to stand the silence any longer. Nagato Yuki answered by raising the book and showing me the cover. My eyes saw a large bunch of dazzling foreign words; it seemed like some sort of science fiction novel.

"Is it interesting?"

Nagato Yuki pushed her glasses upwards effortlessly before replying in an empty tone:

"Unique."

It seemed that she'd answer anything I asked her.

"Which part?"

"All of it."

"So you like reading?"

"Very."

"I see…"

"…"

Back to silence again.

Can I go home now?

I thought of that while putting my bag on the desk. Just as I prepared to sit down on the steel chair, the door crashed open like it was being kicked.

“Hey, sorry I’m late! It took me some time trying to catch this gal!”

Haruhi finally arrived, waving one hand at us. Her other hand was holding onto someone else’s wrist— she’d abducted another person! When Haruhi entered the room, for some reason she locked the door. Click! Hearing that sound, the light-sized girl shuddered uncomfortably.

Wow, she sure is pretty.

She must be Haruhi’s “chosen candidate.”

“W… what are you doing?”

The girl said, close to tears now.

“W-where is this place? Why did you bring me here? And, w-why are you locking the door? What do you want with me?”

“Be quiet!”

Haruhi barked with such force that the girl simply stood in stunned silence.

“Let me introduce her: this is Asahina Mikuru-chan.”

After announcing the girl’s name, Haruhi stopped talking. Seems like that’s all for the introduction.

Silence once again engulfed the classroom. Haruhi looked satisfied with “a job well done”; Nagato Yuki, as usual, kept reading her book without any reaction; and the girl called Asahina Mikuru was simply scared silly. Hey, why isn’t anyone talking? And so I started the conversation.

“Where did you abduct her from?”

“This isn’t abduction! I just forced her to come with me.”

That’s the same thing!

“I found her daydreaming in the second year classroom, so I caught her from there. I explore the corners of the school during recess, so I’ve seen her a few times already.”

So that’s what you’ve been doing during recess time when you’re nowhere to be seen in the classroom. No, wait, now isn’t the time to think about this.

“Anyway, she’s our senpai!”

“So?”

I looked at her in disbelief. Oh god, this girl doesn’t even think about what she’s doing!

“Fine then… tell me, why did you need to find her, erm, Asahina-san, right?”

“Here, have a look.”

Haruhi suddenly pointed towards Asahina Mikuru’s nose, causing her to back off instantly.

“Isn’t she cute?”

That’s something only a dangerous kidnapper would say! That’s what I thought of anyway.

“I believe Moe characters are important!” she continued.

“…Excuse me, what did you just say?”

“I said Moe! The factor to turn people on! Basically, most detective stories have some characters that would turn people on and cause them to be pitied.”

I automatically turned and observed Asahina Mikuru: she has a small body and a face that could easily be mistaken for an elementary school student. Her brown hair is slightly curly, hanging over her back. Her pair of large puppy dog eyes give out a “please protect me” aura. Her half-opened lips reveal a row of white ivory-like teeth that, coupled with her small face, create a perfect combination. If she were given a magic wand with a shiny jewel, she might even transform into a little fairy! Aargh~, what the hell am I thinking about!?

“And that’s not all!”

Haruhi smiled confidently, and then she grabbed Asahina Mikuru-san from behind with her hands.

“Kyaaa!!”

Asahina-san screamed instantly. But Haruhi was unmoved, clutching her breasts through her sailor uniform.

“Aaaaa!”

“She’s so small, yet her breasts are larger than mine! A cute face plus large breasts is also an important factor in turning people on!”

Oh my god, I’m about to faint.

“Wow, they really are big.”

Haruhi stuck her hands into Asahina-san’s uniform and started groping. Stop it, you pervert!

“Man, this pisses me off! Her face is so cute, yet her breasts are bigger than mine!”

“H-Help!!”

Asahina-san blushed bright red. She tried to struggle free with her arms and legs, but her strength was no match for her harasser. As Haruhi started to move her hands towards Asahina-san’s skirt, I finally couldn’t take it any longer and pulled the perverted girl away from Asahina-san.

“What the hell do you think you’re doing!?”

“But they really are huge! It’s true! Why don’t you give them a go as well?”

Asahina-san moaned weakly.

“No thanks.”

That was all I could say.

What surprised me was, during all this commotion, Nagato Yuki had been reading her book, never once lifting her head. What is with this girl anyway?

Suddenly, I thought of something.

“Hey, you can’t be thinking… the sole reason for bringing Asahina-san here is because she’s cute and has large breasts?”

“Why, of course!”

Oh god, you really are an idiot!

“A mascot-like character like her is necessary!”

Necessary my ass! Whoever said that anyway?

Asahina-san tidied her rumpled uniform and raised her head looking at me. Hey, don't look at me like that, you're putting me in an embarrassing situation.

"Mikuru-chan," Haruhi asked, "are you with any other clubs?"

"Y… Yes… the Calligraphy Club…"

"Quit that! It'll get in the way of my club activities."

Haruhi! Aren't you a bit too selfish!?

Asahina-san had the expression of a victim in a certain murder mystery, looking at me with eyes that begged to be rescued. Then it was as if she suddenly noticed the presence of Nagato Yuki. Her eyes grew large and showed some hesitation. A moment later, she sighed and whispered in a low voice:

"I see… I understand."

What did you understand?

"I'll quit the Calligraphy Club, and join your club…"

Her voice was so full of sadness.

"But, I don't know what the Literature Club does."

"We aren't the Literature Club," Haruhi clarified.

Seeing Asahina-san puzzled, I hurriedly cut in to explain.

"We're just temporarily borrowing this room for our club activities. The club you have joined is actually a new association that Suzumiya Haruhi will create in the near future. We don't know what activities there will be; we don't even have a name."

"… What…?"

"Oh, and the one sitting over there, she's the real Literature Club member."

"Oh…"

Asahina-san stood speechless, her cute mouth half open. Her reaction? Absolutely normal.

"That won't be a problem!"

Cheerful to the point of not being responsible for anything, Haruhi smacked Asahina-san's shoulder hard.

“I’ve just thought of a name!”

“… Okay, let’s hear it,” I said with zero enthusiasm.

If possible, I really didn’t want to hear it! But since I’ve already asked, Suzumiya Haruhi used her clear voice to loudly announce the name that she just thought up.

As everyone knows, it all began as a result of Suzumiya Haruhi’s simple and naive vision, and no other reason. And so… the name of our new club has been decided:

The SOS Brigade!

Sekai wo **O**oini moriagerutame no **S**uzumiya Haruhi no Dan

The **S**ave the world by **O**verloading it with fun: **S**uzumiya Haruhi’s Brigade, abbreviated as SOS Brigade.

You can all laugh now.

But before I could even do that, I stood dumbstruck.

Why is it called “Brigade”? It should be “Save the world by Overloading it with fun: Suzumiya Haruhi’s Association”, but since the club still hadn’t satisfied the minimum requirements to become an association and no one was sure what the club was all about, Haruhi simply replied “If that’s the case, then let’s call it a brigade!” And so the club name was now gloriously born.

Upon hearing the name, Asahina-san closed her mouth dejectedly. Nagato Yuki could be counted as an outsider, and I didn’t know what to say. And so, the motion for the new club name was passed, with one for and three abstentions. The SOS Brigade is now open for business! This is such a wonderful occasion!

Hmph, do whatever you like!

After saying “Be sure to meet here after school everyday!”, Haruhi called it a day. Asahina-san’s shoulders drooped, her lifeless figure walking along the corridor further giving off an impression of sadness. I couldn’t bear seeing that, so I called out to her.

“Asahina-san.”

“Yes?”

Asahina-san looked at me with her innocent face, which didn't even look older than mine.

"You don't have to join such a weird club if you don't want to! You don't need to mind her; I'll try to find a way to explain to her."

"No."

She stopped, winked, and smiled:

"It's all right. I want to join."

"But, this could be a boring club!"

"It doesn't matter; haven't you joined as well?"

No! Whether I joined or not is not the issue here!

"Perhaps, this is the absolute outcome on this Temporal Plane…"

She said with her round eyes staring far off in the distance.

"What's that supposed to mean?"

"Besides, I'm interested in Nagato-san's presence…"

"Interested?"

"Eh? No, nothing."

Asahina-san shook her head in trepidation, shaking her wavy hair along.

Then Asahina-san smiled, looking embarrassed, and gave me a deep bow.

"I may be of trouble, so please bear with me from now on."

"You don't have to do that… you'll put me in a difficult position…"

"Please call me Mikuru from now on."

She smiled.

Man, she's so cute that I'm getting dizzy!

The following is a conversation I had with Haruhi one day.

“You know what we need next?”

“Who knows!”

“I’m thinking of finding a mysterious transfer student.”

“Please tell me the definition of a ‘mysterious’ transfer student.”

“Those that get transferred two months after the school term has started are definitely mysterious transfer students. What do you think?”

“Maybe it’s because their parents got a job transfer and they just had to come along.”

“No, that would be too forced and unnatural!”

“Then what is natural for you? I’d really like to know.”

“Mysterious transfer student… will they ever appear?”

“You never really listen to what I say, do you!?”

Rumors started to flow in the school that Haruhi and I were plotting something.

“Hey, just what are you up to with Haruhi?”

Taniguchi would ask that.

“You aren’t in a romantic relationship, are you?”

Absolutely not! To be honest, I too, would like to know what on earth I am doing!

“Try not to do anything too ridiculous, you’re no longer junior high students! If they find out that you vandalized the school trackfield or something like that, you might get suspended!”

If it were Haruhi acting alone, I could simply ignore her. But now there’s Nagato Yuki and Asahina Mikuru-san to take care of— I can’t risk them getting involved. When I realized I was so considerate of them, I suddenly felt so proud of myself.

But the thing is, there is no way that I can stop the insane Haruhi!

“I so want a computer!”

Ever since the SOS Brigade was founded, the Literature Club room started to have more and more stuff besides the rectangular table, steel chairs and book shelf.

In the corner now stood a portable hanger cabinet, a flask and cups, a teapot, a CD/MD playing radio, a freezer, sound recorder, cooking pan, bowl, and all sorts of cooking utensils. Now what? Does she plan for us to live here?

At this moment, Haruhi is sitting on a desk she nicked from who-knows-where. For some reason, a black triangular pyramid with the words "Brigade Commander" stood on the desk.

"In this information age, we don't even have a computer. This won't do!"

Whoever said that?

5 The book in question is The Fall of Hyperion by Dan Simmons—but obviously Kyon doesn't recognize the title's reference to the Greek titan and John Keats's poem about him, and thinks it's about Saturn's moon Hyperion.

Anyway, all the members were here today. Nagato Yuki was in her usual spot, reading a hardback book about a minor satellite of Saturn falling down[5], or something like that. Asahina-san, who didn't have to come, had still obediently arrived and was seated on a steel chair, looking confused.

Haruhi jumped off the desk and ran towards me with a sinister smile.

"Which is why I'm going to obtain one now," Haruhi said, like a hunter looking for its prey.

"Obtain one, you mean a computer? From where? You don't plan on robbing an electronics store, do you?"

"Of course not! It's going to be somewhere closer!"

"Follow me!" Asahina-san and I complied with Haruhi's orders and followed her down the corridor, eventually arriving at the Computer Study Group two rooms away.

I see!

"Here, take this."

Haruhi handed me an instant camera.

"Now listen carefully! I'll tell you the plan, and you must follow it no matter what! You only have one chance."

Haruhi pulled me down and whispered her "plan" in my ear.

“Wha!? You can’t do that!”

“Does it matter?”

Of course it doesn’t matter to you, missy! I turned to a puzzled looking Asahina, trying to warn her by winking at her.

You’d better leave at once!

But Asahina-san looked surprised at me and started blushing. Oh no, she completely got the wrong idea.

Just as I was about to save Asahina-san from certain doom, Haruhi had knocked on the Computer Study Group room door.

“Hello there! I’ve come to collect a computer from you!”

The spacing is similar, but compared to our room, this room was narrower. Each of the evenly spaced desks had a desktop computer on it with CD sound effects. The computer fans whirling away were the only sounds heard in the room.

The four boys sitting on their seats typing on their keyboards all stuck their heads out towards the door to see what Haruhi was up to.

“Who’s in charge here?”

Haruhi smiled pompously. A male student stood up and answered.

“I’m the president, can I help you?”

“Do I have to repeat myself? I just said: give me a computer.”

The nameless Computer Study Group president displayed a “What the hell?” expression and violently shook his head.

“That won’t do. Because the school doesn’t fund us enough, these computers are all bought with our hard-earned money! We can’t just give them to you for free. Do you think we’re fools?”

“What does it matter? Just one would do, you have plenty anyways!”

“That… wait a moment, who are you guys anyway?”

“I’m Suzumiya Haruhi, Commander of the SOS Brigade, and these two are Subordinate One and Subordinate Two.”

Wait, who decided we’re your subordinates!?

“I command you in the name of the SOS Brigade: hand over a computer at once! Don’t give me any excuses!”

“I don’t know who you guys are, but absolutely not! You can go buy your own computers!”

“Since you’ve said that, we have our ways.”

Haruhi’s eyes glared fearlessly. Oh no, that is a bad omen!

Haruhi pushed Asahina-san, who was standing awestruck next to her, towards the president, and then she grabbed his hand and placed it on Asahina-san’s breast.

“Kyaaa~~!!”

“Wha!?”

Click!

At the sound of the two screaming, I clicked the camera shutter.

Haruhi grabbed Asahina-san, preventing her from escaping, while her other hand propelled the president’s hand harder into Asahina’s breast.

“Kyon! One more picture!”

I reluctantly pressed the shutter again. Asahina-san, and the nameless president, you have my sincerest apologies. Just as Haruhi was about to stuff the president’s hand under Asahina-san’s skirt, the president finally broke free.

“WHAT THE HELL DO YOU THINK YOU’RE DOING!?”

Haruhi waved her finger elegantly at the furiously blushing president.

“Uh uh uh! We now have photographic evidence of you sexually harassing our members! If you don’t want the school to know about these photos, then hand over the computer!”

“What kind of joke is this!?”

The president protested furiously. I totally understand how you feel, man.

“You forcefully grabbed my hand! I’m innocent!”

“Oh really? You can try explaining, but who’s going to believe you?”

I turned and looked at Asahina-san lying on the ground paralyzed. She must have been in so much shock that all energy had left her.

On the other hand, the president continued to resist.

“My members are witnesses to my innocence! That was not of my own will!”

The three members who were standing dumbstruck all nodded their heads vehemently.

“That’s right!”

“The president is innocent!”

If Haruhi could listen to you guys, then she wouldn’t be Suzumiya Haruhi.

“All right, then I’ll just say you guys gang-raped her!”

At this instance, everyone’s face turned white, including mine and Asahina-san’s. Oh god, did it really have to come to this?

“S… Suzumiya-san…!”

Asahina-san desperately looped her arms around Haruhi’s feet, but Haruhi simply kicked them off. Haruhi then lifted her chest and arrogantly said:

“So how about it? Are you giving us one or not?”

The president’s face went from red to white, finally turning dark.

In the end, he surrendered.

“Just pick one and get out!”

Having said that, the president sat down dejectedly. His members all rushed towards him.

“President!”

“Get a hold of yourself!”

“Are you all right?”

The president’s head drooped like a puppet whose strings were broken. Seeing such a broken figure, even as Haruhi’s companion, I couldn’t help but shed a tear of sadness for him.

“Which one is the latest model?”

You’re such a cold-blooded girl!

“Why should we tell you!?”

The angry members continued their meager resistance, but Haruhi simply pointed at me and my camera.

“D… damn it! That one!”

Haruhi looked in the direction the member pointed and inspected the model and serial number of the computer. Then, she took out a piece of paper from her skirt pocket.

“I went to the electronics store and asked for a list of the latest models. This doesn’t seem to be one of them.”

This girl has everything so meticulously planned that it’s becoming scary.

After inspecting all the other computers, Haruhi pointed to one of them.

“I want this one.”

“W… wait! We just bought that last month!”

“Camera.”

“… T-take it, you thieves!”

Like he said, we were truly thieves.

Haruhi’s greed knew no bounds. After plucking all the cables and wires, she moved all the necessary equipment back to the Literature Club room without consideration. She then had the Computer Study Group people reinstall the wires for us and had them lay two internet cables from their room to ours, so we could use the internet. She even forced them to set up an intranet for us. Her despicable ways are no different from a robber!

“Asahina-san.”

Being helpless the whole time, I could only slowly pick up a devastated Asahina-san, who was kneeling on the ground, covering her face and sobbing endlessly.

“Let’s go back.”

“Sob…”

Haruhi, you idiot, can’t you grope your own breasts!? For someone who undresses in front of guys without a second thought, this is nothing! I comforted Asahina-san, while mumbling about what on earth Haruhi wanted a computer for.

Very soon, I would find out.

And that is to make an SOS Brigade website!

All right, here comes the question: Who should make the website?

“You, of course!” Haruhi said.

“Since you’re so free, you might as well do it! I’m busy looking for the remaining members!”

The computer was placed on the desk with the “Brigade Commander” pyramid. Haruhi added while surfing the net with her mouse:

“Have it completed in the next day or two. We won’t be able to do anything without a webpage.”

Asahina-san’s body lay over the desk, her shoulders shivering, next to where Nagato Yuki is sitting, who as usual just reads her book, ignoring everything. Seems like I’m the only one who heard what Haruhi was saying. I had no choice but to comply with her. At least I’m pretty sure that’s what Haruhi thought.

“I can’t do anything even if you say that.”

That’s what I wanted to say, to be honest. I’m not used to receiving orders from Haruhi! The only reason I agreed is because it’s a webpage. I haven’t done it before, but it does sound interesting.

And so, my arduous webpage design began on the second day.

Having said that, it was much easier than I thought. Because the guys from Computer Study Group already had all the software installed on the hard drive, all I needed to do was just follow the program and do some copy and pasting, and that was it.

The problem is, what should I write on the website?

Right now, I still don’t know what the SOS Brigade is about, so I had absolutely nothing to write about. After writing ‘Welcome to the SOS Brigade Home Page!’ on the top, I simply stopped. “Hurry up and finish it, you hear?” Haruhi’s words sounded like a curse ringing through my ears, so I had to use my lunch time to continue my designing while having my lunch.

“Nagato-san, do you have any ideas on what to write?” I asked, who seemed to come here even during lunch break.

“Not really.”

She didn't look up. I know this is none of my business, but I'm curious as to whether she even pays attention in class.

Turning my eyes from Nagato back to the 17 inch monitor, I fell into deep thought again.

I suddenly thought of a problem: what would happen if the school found out that a yet-to-be-recognized association is using their bandwidth to host a website?

"It's all right as long as they don't find out!" I imagined Haruhi replying, "If it does gets discovered, then we'll just abandon the website. This sort of stuff is first come, first served, you know?"

Really, in some ways I'm rather envious of Haruhi's optimistic and forward-looking attitude!

After making some website links and writing the email address— it's a bit early to set up a forum— I uploaded the website, which only contained a front page without any details on it.

That should do! After making sure the page could load, I switched off the computer. As I was about to stretch myself, I was startled to find Nagato standing right behind me.

That's strange, how come I didn't hear her making any footsteps? I didn't know when Nagato arrived behind me. Her face was as white as a mask. She stared at me with her poker face as though I was some eye test chart.

"Take this."

She handed me a very thick book, which I impulsively took. It sure is heavy! Looking at the cover, it was the science fiction novel Nagato was reading a few days ago.

"For you."

After saying that, Nagato left the room without even turning back; I didn't even have time to say anything. Why are you lending such a thick book to me? At this moment, the bell rang signaling the end of lunch break. Seems like there aren't a lot of people who respect my opinion.

After I carried the hardback book back to my classroom and sat down, I felt someone poking my back with a mechanical pencil.

"So, is the website done?"

Haruhi held the edges of the desk and stared at me with a stiff face. I noticed that her notebook was full of scribbles here and there. I tried to ignore the stares of my classmates and replied:

"It's done all right, but it's a very simple, crappy website."

"That'll do, as long as it has an email address."

Why can't you register your own free email address!?

"That won't do! What if a lot of people sent their mail in and flooded my inbox?"

I don't understand how a newly registered email address could get flooded with mail so quickly.

"That's a secret!"

After saying that, she gave a mysteriously sinister smile. I have a bad feeling about this.

"You'll know once school has ended today, but until then, it's highly classified."

Please, I'd rather you never tell me what it is!

In the sixth period, Haruhi was nowhere to be seen in class. She couldn't have gone home, could she? That wouldn't be possible. It's probably another bad omen.

Very soon it was the end of class, and I automatically walked towards the club room. Though I wondered why I did so, my footsteps never stopped. Finally, I arrived at the club room.

"Hello there!"

As expected, there sat Nagato Yuki and Asahina-san.

I know I'm not one to criticize, but these two sure have a lot of free time on their hands!

Seeing me enter, Asahina-san greeted me with a relieved expression. Seems like having to spend time alone with Nagato can be exhausting.

Wait a moment, you just suffered Haruhi's evil clutches yesterday, and you're still coming today?

"Where's Suzumiya-san?"

"God knows. She hasn't been in the class since the sixth period. She's probably off to nick equipment from somewhere."

"Do I have to do what Suzumiya-san had me do yesterday again…?"

Seeing how depressed Asahina-san looked, I said gently:

“Don’t worry! If she tries doing anything strange to you, I’ll do everything I can to stop her. She can use her own body for blackmail! It’s not like I can’t beat her when it comes to scuffles!”

“Thank you.”

Seeing her bow at me cutely, I really felt like embracing her tightly. But of course I didn’t do that.

“Then I’m counting on you.”

“No problem at all!”

Even though I repeatedly assured her, five minutes later, all those reassurances got thrown out the window, into the sea, and evaporated like a water droplet on the surface of the sun. Oh, how naive I was!

“Hiya!”

Haruhi greeted us energetically and entered the room, carrying with her two paper bags.

“Sorry guys, I was delayed.”

That sure is kind of you! For someone obsessed like Haruhi, to be considerate of others is probably the last thing on her mind.

Placing the paper bags on the ground, Haruhi turned and locked the door. Asahina-san reflexively shuddered upon hearing the door click.

“Suzumiya, what are you planning today? I’ll be frank, I’m not going to do anything like plundering and blackmailing again!”

“What are you talking about? I’d never do such a thing!”

Really? Then how do you explain the computer on the desk!?

“By peaceful means of course! OK, first things first, let’s have a look at this.”

She pulled out a bunch of A4 papers with some handwriting on top from one of the paper bags.

“These are fliers made to introduce the SOS Brigade to everyone. It took me a lot of hard work to sneak into the photocopying room and print these 200 fliers!”

Haruhi handed out the fliers to us. So that’s why you skipped class, huh? You should count yourself lucky that you weren’t caught. I wasn’t interested in what was written on the flier, but since I’ve already taken one, I might as well read what it had to say.

The SOS Brigade founding principle:

We, the SOS Brigade, are seeking all sorts of paranormal events in this world. We welcome anyone who has experienced, is experiencing, or senses that they will experience any kind of supernatural or mysterious events to come to us for consultation. We will do our best to answer your questions. Please note, however, that we do not handle normal paranormal events; it must be a paranormal event that we deem to be very shocking. Our email address is…

I'm starting to have a faint idea of what the SOS Brigade is all about now. It seems that, no matter what, Haruhi wanted to indulge herself in the world of science fiction, mystery, and fantasy novels.

"All right, time to hand out the fliers."

"Where do we do that?"

"At the school entrance. Right now there's still a lot of students who haven't gone home yet."

Yes, yes, yes, whatever you say, ma'am. Just as I'm about to pick up the paper bag with the fliers, Haruhi stopped me.

"You don't have to go, just me and Mikuru-chan will do."

"What?"

Asahina-san, who was carrying a flier in her hands, turned her head looking puzzled. I turned and saw Haruhi fumbling through the other paper bag, taking out something.

"Ta-da!"

6 Doraemon, the most famous robotic cat in Japanese culture, "possesses a four-dimensional pocket from which he can produce all manner of futuristic tools, gadgets and playthings from a future department store."

Smiling as happily as a robotic cat, Haruhi pulled out a piece of black garment. No, it can't be! As Haruhi finished emptying the contents of the paper bag from the fourth dimension[6], I understood at once why she wanted Asahina-san to hand the fliers, and I prayed for her well being. Asahina-san, may your soul rest in peace!

A black leotard, net stockings, bunny ears, bow tie, white cuffs, and a bunny tail.

Isn't that a bunny girl costume!?

"W… What are those for?" Asahina-san asked shyly.

"You should know. To dress up as a bunny girl!" Haruhi said matter-of-factly.

“Y-You wouldn’t want me to wear that, w-would you?”

“Of course! I even prepared one for you!”

“I… I’m not wearing that!”

“Don’t worry, the size will fit you perfectly.”

“T-That’s not the problem! Y… You wouldn’t want me to wear that at the school entrance, w-would you?”

“Why, of course.”

“No! I don’t wanna!”

“Stop complaining!”

This is it; she’s been targeted. Haruhi leapt onto Asahina-san, like a mother lion preying upon a helpless deer, and began tearing off her sailor uniform.

“NOOO…”

“Now be a good girl and don’t move!” Haruhi said roughly while swiftly pulling off Asahina-san’s top, then she moved onto Asahina-san’s skirt. Just as I was about to stop Haruhi’s insanity, my eyes met Asahina-san’s.

“D… DON‘T LOOK!!”

Hearing her scream, I hurriedly ran towards the door… Damn it! The door’s locked! It took a while before I could unlock the door and rush out of the room.

Before I left, I took one quick peek — I discovered Nagato reading her book as if nothing had happened. Doesn’t she have anything to say about this!?

I leaned back on the door, hearing Asahina-san’s screams from behind it.

“Kyaa~~!!” “Nooo!” “A… at least let me take them off myself… Sob~~!”

These are mixed in with Haruhi’s yells of victory.

“That’s great!” “Take that off! Quickly!” “You should have done what I said!”

Damn it, don’t ask me to fantasize about what’s going on inside!

A moment later, Haruhi’s voice came through the door.

“You can come in now!”

As I sighed entering the room, I was greeted by the sight of two beautiful bunny girls. Whether it’s Haruhi or Asahina-san, they both suit the costume well.

A large part of their backs and cleavage were exposed, the net stockings wrapping their legs nicely and the pair of bunny ears bouncing above their heads…

Haruhi is skinny but has the right proportions; Asahina-san is small, but her figure is also perfect. To be honest, they really are a feast to behold for the eyes!

Just as I was wondering whether to say “The costume suits you,” to a crying Asahina-san, Haruhi said:

“What do you think?”

And you still have the balls to ask me what I think. Is your skull badly damaged!?

“This is going to grab everyone’s attention. At this rate, people will definitely come to get the flyers!” said Haruhi.

“If you wear such strange costumes out in the open, people are going to look at you funny… Wait a minute, how come Nagato-san doesn’t need to wear this?”

“I only bought two sets. Since they come with accessories, they’re very expensive.”

“Where’d you buy this stuff anyway?”

“On the net.”

“… I see.”

Just as I was wondering when Haruhi became taller than me, I noticed she was wearing high-heeled shoes as well.

Haruhi picked up the paper bag containing the flyers.

“Let’s go, Mikuru-chan.”

Asahina-san crossed her arms in front of her chest and looked at me pleadingly. I could only stare at her in her bunny girl outfit.

I’m sorry, I just couldn’t dredge up any resistance.

Asahina-san tried to grab the table and resist, sobbing like a kid, but she was no match for Haruhi's strength. She was dragged away by Haruhi, and the two bunny girls disappeared from the room. Just as I sat down dejectedly, feeling guilty of myself…

"That."

Nagato Yuki pointed on the ground. I looked and saw two sailor uniforms lying there… Erm, is that a bra I just saw?

The short-haired, spectacled girl pointed at the cabinet at the other side of the room and then went back to reading her book.

Can't you pick up the clothes yourself!?

I sighed and went to pick up their clothes, placing them in the cabinet. Ah~!, you could feel their body heat on the clothes. They're still warm!

Half an hour later, an exhausted Asahina-san returned. Whoa, her eyes are as red as a bunny's, I'd better not say anything yet. I hurriedly gave her a chair, and like last time, she simply sat and drooped towards the table, her shoulders shivering. Looks like she doesn't even have the strength to change. But facing that naked back of hers, I didn't know where else to look, so I took off my jacket and draped it across her shivering shoulders. The presence of a sobbing girl and a bookworm who didn't care about what was going on, along with me who was at a loss with what to do, had brought the atmosphere of the room to an all-time low. The screams of the Baseball Club could be heard in the distance.

As I was about to think of what's for dinner tonight, Haruhi returned. The first thing she did was scowl angrily:

"Damn them! What the hell, those damn teachers! They always get in the way!"

Not sure why she was so angry, I asked:

"Is there a problem?"

"I hadn't even handed out half the fliers and in comes a stupid teacher asking us to stop handing them out! What the hell is wrong with him?"

You moron. If the teachers ignored something like students dressing up as bunny girls and handing out flyers at the school entrance, then that'd be abnormal!

"Mikuru-chan was nearly in tears, and I got taken to see the Principal, and then that Okabe from the Handball Club came!"

I guess the Principal and Okabe-sensei probably didn't know where to place their eyes when looking at you dressed like that.

“Man, this pisses me off! That’s it for today! Dismissed!”

Haruhi slowly took off her bunny ears and then proceeded to remove her bunny girl costume. I immediately rushed out of the room.

“How long are you going to cry like that? Hurry up and change!”

I leaned on the corridor wall and waited for them to change. Seems like Haruhi isn’t really a born exhibitionist, it’s just that she has no idea what effect the sight of her being half naked would have on guys. The reason she dressed herself up in a bunny costume wasn’t really to show her sexy body, but rather to attract people’s attention.

At this rate, there’s no way she can experience a normal romantic relationship.

I wish she could be more considerate of how the guys think. At least be considerate for me! Honestly, to hang out with such a crazy person is really exhausting. Besides, for Asahina-san’s sake I had to wish for that. Right… Nagato, at least let us know what your opinion is!

A while later, Asahina-san emerged from the room, giving a sad expression of someone who had just failed her exams. She needed to support herself on the wall or she would surely fall. Not knowing what to say to her, I could only stand in silence.

“Kyon-kun…”

Her dreamy voice sounds like one of those ghosts from the haunted sunken cruise ships.

“If something should happen so I cannot become a bride, will you take me…?”

Erm, what should I say? And, why are you calling me Kyon as well!?

Asahina-san returned my jacket to me in a robotic way. Just as I was wondering if she would fall into my chest and cry, she’d already walked away.

Damn… such a pity!

The next day, Asahina-san took the day off.

Haruhi was already famous enough in school, but after the bunny girl incident, her name and eccentricity had become the stuff of school legends. Not that I really mind, since I’m not really responsible for Haruhi’s actions!

What I do mind is, Suzumiya Haruhi’s actions have caused everyone to start gossiping about Asahina Mikuru-san as well. That, and the odd glares I receive from everyone at school.

“Hey, Kyon… seems like you’re having a fun time with Suzumiya…”

Taniguchi said to me in a sympathetic tone after school. “I never thought you would become good friends with her… looks like nothing is impossible in this world!”

Ah, shut up!

“I was surprised yesterday! Seeing bunny girls while I was heading home, I thought I was dreaming!”

Kunikida joined in the conversation, carrying a familiar flier with him.

“What is this SOS Brigade? What’s it about?”

Go ask Haruhi that question. I don’t know, nor do I want to. Even if I did, I don’t feel like telling you!

“It asks us to provide any paranormal events, but it doesn’t define what those are. And, what does it mean by not handling normal paranormal events?”

Even Asakura Ryouko came to have a word with me.

“You guys seem to be doing some interesting stuff. But if it’s something that’s way overboard, I advise you to stop at once. Honestly, you guys went too far yesterday.”

If I had known, I would have taken the day off as well today!

Haruhi is still mad. On one hand, she’s mad that the teachers stopped her from handing out the fliers; on the other hand, she’s mad that the SOS Brigade email inbox is completely empty. I expected one or two prank mails in the inbox, but it turns out people were more rational than I thought. Perhaps no one wanted to have anything to do with Haruhi and get themselves in trouble?

Haruhi scowled at the empty inbox, shaking the optical mouse vigorously.

“Why isn’t anyone sending any mail in?”

“There wasn’t any yesterday nor today. Maybe everyone does have experiences they could tell, but just can’t trust a suspicious looking club like ours?”

I tried to explain unconvincingly.

Have you experienced any paranormal events? Yes. Oh, that’s great, then please tell me. All right, actually…

Please! It's not as if something like that would happen, OK? Now you listen, Haruhi! Those sorts of things would only occur in a comic book or novel. Real life is very cruel and strict. Things like a conspiracy to destroy the world from a normal prefecture high school, mutant organisms wandering in a peaceful suburban area, or a spaceship hidden inside a mountain, all these things are impossible. Impossible! You hear me? You understand now, don't you? All your eccentric behavior is a result of you not being able to find a way to release your unhappy emotions, isn't that right? But, it's time for you to wake up. You should settle down and find a boyfriend who would take you home every day and to the movies on Sundays, or maybe you should join some sports clubs to release your excess energy. With your abilities, you'd get into the first team in no time, becoming an active member.

…I had wanted to say more, but I had only thought up to five lines when Haruhi's fists came waving over, so I'd better stop here.

"Mikuru-chan took the day off today, I hear?"

"Maybe she's not coming back. Such a poor girl, I hope she's not traumatized by yesterday's events."

"Damn, and I prepared a new costume for her to try on today!"

"Can't you try them on yourself!?"

"Of course I can! It's just that it'll be too boring without Mikuru-chan."

Nagato Yuki blended in with the background as though she were invisible. Strange, why are you so obsessed with Asahina-san; why can't you for once try the costume on Nagato and force her to play along with you? I know I shouldn't say this, but thinking about it, I'd like to see how the normally expressionless Nagato would look in that bunny girl costume. She'd definitely give a feeling different from the often crying Asahina-san.

The transfer student Haruhi had expected had finally arrived!

Haruhi told me the news before homeroom one day.

"Don't you think it's great? The transfer student's really coming!"

Haruhi leaned forward towards me, speaking excitedly. Her bright smile was like a kindergarten kid finally getting the toy she wants.

I don't know where she heard it from, but the transfer student is going to be in Class 1-9.

"This is a chance in a lifetime. It's a pity the student isn't in the same class, but it's definitely a mysterious transfer student, there's no mistake!"

You haven't even met him or her, so how do you even know if it's a mysterious transfer student?

"Didn't I say it before? A high percentage of those that get transferred in the middle of the school term are abnormal."

Who on earth made such a statistic? I guess that is a mystery in itself.

If everyone who gets transferred in the middle of May is abnormal, then there'd be loads of mysterious transfer students all over Japan.

But, Haruhi's way of thinking cannot be confined by logic. After the first session bell rang, Haruhi instantly ran out of the classroom. She probably went to visit the Mystery Transfer Student in Class 1-9.

Just before the bell rang to signal the beginning of class, Haruhi returned with a confused face.

"So is it a mysterious transfer student…?"

"Hmm… doesn't feel like one."

Of course it doesn't!

"We talked, but I still don't have enough information. Maybe they're just putting up a front as a normal person; I believe that's highly probable. After all, it's not like they would expose their real identities on the day they transferred. I'll go ask again at the next recess."

Please don't go ask again! I can imagine the Class 1-9 students, who had nothing to do with Haruhi, being scared to death by her sudden appearance while she grabbed one of the students to ask, "Where's the transfer student?", before she rushed in. That, or she would barge in when the student was having a conversation with his (or her) friends and interrogate the startled transfer student with questions like "Where are you from? Who are you really?"

At this moment, I thought of something else.

"Is the transfer student a guy or a girl?"

"Though there's a possibility of a disguise, he appears to be a guy."

Then he is a guy!

Seems like the SOS Brigade has a chance of recruiting another male member besides me. Haruhi might just drag that transfer student in without hearing his opinion simply because he's new. But, he may not be as nice as me or Asahina-san. Can she really bring him into the club? No matter how strong-willed Haruhi is, someone with a strong opinion would simply ignore her!

As long as we have the numbers, the “Save the world by Overloading it with Fun: Suzumiya Haruhi’s Brigade” would be formed as an association. No matter if the school recognizes it or not, the person that has to do all the paperwork and menial tasks is most likely to be… me! For the next three years, I will have to carry the name of “Subordinate of Suzumiya Haruhi” and live my days in despair.

I hadn’t thought of what I want to do when I graduate, but I knew that I wanted to go to a university, so I had to watch my behavior. But as long as I’m with Haruhi, it seems that this wish could never become true.

What should I do?

I couldn’t think of anything.

I know I should have just confronted Haruhi, had her dismiss the SOS Brigade, and then tried my best to persuade her to live a normal high school life. Perhaps I could have gotten her to stop thinking about aliens and time travelers, settle down and find a boyfriend, or join some sports club, and be content with these three years of high school.

Sigh, it would be great if I could have done that!

If I’d have had stronger willpower, I wouldn’t have gotten sucked so helplessly into the whirlpool centered around Suzumiya Haruhi. I would have peacefully lived out these three years of high school and graduated normally.

… I wish it would have been like that!

However, the reason I’m saying this is because of the strange events afterwards that have happened to me; I believe everyone understands now?

Where should I begin?

Right, let’s start from when the transfer student first arrived at our club room.

Chapter 3

Due to the infamous bunny girl incident, Asahina-san has become a household name as well in the school. After taking a day off, she once again boldly appeared in the club room.

As there hadn't been any decent club activities yet, I brought an Othello board, which had been buried deep in my home, long forgotten, and played some games with Asahina-san while chatting with her.

The website is done, but it was as good as useless as there were no visitors, nor a single email. The computer was only good for surfing the internet. If the guys from the Computer Study Group ever found out, they'd cry themselves to death.

Sitting next to Nagato Yuki, who as usual is reading her book, I started the third round of Othello with Asahina-san.

"Suzumiya-san sure is taking her time." Asahina-san said softly while still staring at the board.

Seeing that she's not affected by what's happened before, I breathed a sigh of relief. No matter what, to be able to be in the same room with a cute girl who's one year your senior is enough to make one giddy.

"There's a transfer student coming in today, I bet she went to look for him."

"Transfer student?"

Asahina-san raised her head like a little bird.

"Haruhi was excited when she heard that there's a transfer student in Class 1-9. She really seems to like transfer students!"

I placed a black piece on the board and flipped the white pieces.

"Uh huh…"

"Oh yeah, Asahina-san, I never thought you'd come today!"

"Um… I did hesitate for a while, but I was a bit concerned, so in the end I came."

Where've I heard you say that before?

"What are you concerned about?"

Smack! She flipped one of the board pieces with her tiny fingers.

"Um… nothing."

I turned around and noticed Nagato staring at the board. Her face is static like a clay doll, but under her glasses, her eyes showed a glare never seen before.

"…"

Her glare was like a new born kitten amazed at seeing a dog for the first time. I traced her vision towards my hand which was holding the board piece.

"… Nagato-san, you wanna play?"

After I said that, Nagato robotically blinked her eyes and, in a very minuscule way that you wouldn't have noticed unless you paid very close attention, lightly nodded her head. So I swapped seats with Nagato and sat beside Asahina-san.

Nagato picked up one of the pieces and studied it intensely. When she discovered the pieces would stick together because they were magnetic, she recoiled her hands as if she were frightened.

"Nagato-san, have you played Othello before?"

She slowly swung her head.

"Do you know the rules then?"

The answer was negative.

"Well see here, as you're holding black, your objective is to surround the white pieces with your black pieces. And then you flip the surrounded white pieces over and they become black. In the end, whoever has more pieces wins."

She nodded her head. Afterwards, she elegantly placed the pieces on the board, though she was kind of clumsy in flipping the opponent's pieces.

After the opponent was changed, Asahina-san started to appear more anxious. I noticed Asahina-san's fingers started to tremble, and she wouldn't dare lift her head to look at Nagato. She would occasionally take a peek at Nagato and then look away quickly, which she did many times. In the end maybe Asahina-san couldn't really concentrate, so black quickly took a clear advantage in the game.

How come? Asahina-san seems to be very wary of Nagato, I just don't understand why.

It wasn't long before black won convincingly. Just as the two were to begin another round, the perpetrator responsible for all the chaos returned with a new sacrifice.

"Hiya, kept ya waiting!"

Haruhi greeted us casually while pulling the sleeve of a male student.

“This is today’s new transfer student in First Year Ninth Class, his name is…”

Haruhi suddenly stopped and gave a “it’s your cue” look. The sacrifice turned and smiled at us.

“… Koizumi Itsuki, pleased to meet you.”

A skinny figure, he gives an impression of an energetic young man. A very contented smile, kind eyes, and a handsome face. If he should make a pose as a model on those supermarket flyers, he’ll definitely get a lot of fans. If he’s a nice guy, he’ll be even more popular.

“This is the SOS Brigade club room. I’m the commander, Suzumiya Haruhi. These here are Subordinates One, Two, and Three. Oh and, you’re Number Four, remember to get along well!”

What kind of introduction is that!? The only names mentioned are yours and his!

“I don’t mind joining!”

Koizumi, the transfer student, smiled kindly:

“So what kind of club is this?”

If there were a hundred people here, they’d certainly ask the same question. A lot of people had come to ask me this question, but I could never find the answer for that. If a person can answer that skillfully, then he’s a talented con artist! Haruhi doesn’t seem concerned, however, and smiled cheerfully at us and said:

“Then let me tell you what the SOS Brigade is about, that is…”

Haruhi slowly breathed in, and then dramatically revealed the shocking truth.

“To find aliens, time travelers and espers, and befriend them!”

The whole world’s time seems to have stopped at this moment.

That’s a bit of a ridiculous statement. The only thing in my mind was “Just as I thought.” But the other three didn’t think so.

Asahina-san was completely dumbfounded, widening her eyes and ears and stared at the cheery looking Haruhi. Nagato Yuki was the same, after turning her head towards Haruhi, she stopped as if she’d ran out of batteries. What surprised me was that Nagato’s eyes widened a little bit. For someone who doesn’t show a lot of expression, that is a surprising reaction.

As for Koizumi, he gave a somewhat enigmatic smile; it was hard to know what the smile meant. A moment later, Koizumi was the first to get back to his senses.

“Ah, I see.”

As if he understood something, he looked at Asahina-san and Nagato, and nodded in comprehension.

“As expected from Suzumiya-san.”

After making this ambiguous comment, he continued:

“No problem, I’ll join. I look forward to working with you guys.”

He smiled showing his bright, white teeth.

Hey! Did you just accept her explanation just like that? Did you really even listen?

Noticing a confused-looking me, Koizumi suddenly came and stretched his hand towards me.

“I’m Koizumi. As I just transferred today, there’s still a lot for me to learn. Nice to meet you.”

I shook the polite Koizumi’s hand.

“Sure, I’m…”

“He’s Kyon!”

Haruhi introduced me on her own accord, and then pointed to the other two: “The cute one there is Mikuru-chan, and the four-eyed one is Yuki-san.”

Crash!

A loud noise thundered. It was Asahina-san who tripped over her chair as she was trying to get up, and landed her forehead on the Othello board.

“Are you all right?”

Hearing Koizumi’s voice, Asahina-san reacted by turning her head, doll-like, and looking up at the exchange student radiantly. Hmph! That’s pretty annoying, that look.

“… I… I’m fine.” Asahina-san said in a very small tone, looking shyly at Koizumi.

“Great, now we have five members! The school won’t be able to do anything about it!”

Haruhi continued:

“Right, the SOS Brigade is open for business! Everyone, let us work together and move forward!”

What do you mean open for business, missy?

When I noticed, Nagato had already gone back to her seat reading her hardcover book. Nagato-san, Haruhi has already counted you as a member, are you sure you’re OK with that?

After Haruhi said she wanted to take Koizumi for a tour of the school and left, Asahina-san also said she had things to do at home, so only Nagato and I remained behind.

I wasn’t in the mood to play Othello, and there’s not much fun watching Nagato read, so I decided to go home as well. I picked up my bag and bid my farewell to Nagato.

“I’ll be going then!”

“Have you read the book?”

Hearing her say that, I stopped in my footsteps. Turning around, I noticed Nagato Yuki looking at me with her near expressionless eyes.

“What book? Oh, you mean the thick hardback one you lent me the other day?”

“Yes.”

“Oh, I haven’t read that… Maybe I should return it to you?”

“There’s no need to.”

Nagato never minces her words, she always gets straight to the point in one short sentence.

“Remember to read it today.”

Nagato said flatly.

“As soon as you get home.”

Her voice has a tone of command to it.

Besides those required by Literature classes, I rarely touch novels, but since Nagato recommended it, it should be quite interesting.

“… All right already!”

Hearing my response, Nagato went back to reading her book.

Which is why, I found myself pedaling my bike as hard as I could in the darkness.

I returned home after saying goodbye to Nagato and went straight to my room after dinner to start reading the foreign science fiction novel she shoved to me. Just when I was getting dizzy with the sea of packed words, I decided to flip through the book wondering if I could ever finish reading this, and a bookmark fell from the book and onto the carpet.

It was a strange looking bookmark with flower patterns printed on it. I flipped it around and found a line of words written.

Seven o'clock tonight, waiting for you at the park outside the station.

The words are so neat, as though as it has been written by a word processor. This plain looking handwriting does look like Nagato's, though I'm not certain.

I've had this book for days now. So is the seven o'clock written for seven o'clock that night? Or is it seven o'clock for tonight? Could it be that she felt that I would eventually find this bookmark one day and waited in the park every night? Is the reason Nagato wanted me to read the book tonight is so that I would discover this bookmark tonight? Even then, why didn't she just tell me directly? Besides, I don't know why she wanted to call me to the park.

I looked at my watch; the time is just past six forty-five. Even though the station is the nearest one to my school, it would take at least 20 minutes for me to ride my bike there from my place.

I thought about it for about ten seconds.

I stuck the bookmark in my jeans before dashing out of my room and down the stairs like a swift rabbit. I came to the house entrance to see my sister coming out, carrying a popsicle and asking, "Where are you going, Kyon-kun?" I answered "The station." hopped on my bike, which was tied by the door, and rode off to my destination.

If Nagato isn't there, I think I'm going to laugh very loud at myself.

Seems like I won't be able to laugh.

As a careful bicycle rider, it took me till ten past seven to arrive at the park outside the station. As the park was far from the main road, there weren't a lot of people at this time of day.

Under the noises of the trains and cars, I carried my bike and walked into the park. Under the lights of the equally spaced lamp posts ahead, I could faintly see Nagato Yuki's slim figure sitting on one of the long park benches.

She really is the sort of person whose presence is not easily detected. Sitting so quietly in the park, if one didn't know better she could have been mistaken as a ghost!

Nagato slowly stood up like a string puppet.

She's still wearing her uniform.

"Are you glad I finally came?"

She nodded.

"You couldn't have waited here every day?"

She nodded again.

"… Is it something you can't tell me at school?"

Nagato nodded and then walked in front of me.

"This way."

After these two words, she turned and strode forward. Her way of walking is like a ninja: no footsteps can be heard at all. I could only reluctantly follow behind Nagato, who has blended perfectly with the night.

After a few minutes of walking and watching the breeze blow her hair gently, we arrived at a apartment block very near the station.

"Right here."

Nagato took out her pass and brushed it once against the electronic sensor at the entrance; the glass door ahead of us opened. I left my bicycle by the entrance and followed closely behind Nagato, who was already headed to the elevator. Inside the elevator, Nagato seemed to have something in mind but said nothing, only staring at the floor number board. Finally, the elevator arrived at the seventh floor.

"Excuse me, but where are we going?"

It was late, but I had to ask. Nagato, who was walking slowly along the corridor, replied:

"My home."

I stopped at once. Wait a minute! Why is Nagato taking me to her home?

“Don’t worry, there’s no one else inside.”

Wait, what’s that supposed to mean?

Nagato opened the door to room 708, and then turned to face me.

“Enter.”

Are you serious?

I tried to stay calm and entered with trepidation. As I took off my shoes, Nagato pushed the door shut.

I had a feeling of having just boarded a pirate ship, and I apprehensively turned around at the ominous sound of the door closing.

“Come in.”

Nagato said that flatly and took off her shoes as well. If the apartment had been dark, I could still have escaped. Alas, it was brightly illuminated, making the wide apartment look even wider.

I guess this must be one of those posh condominiums. To be so near the station, the price had to be very expensive.

But why does it look as if no one has lived in here?

Besides the living room, which had a small table with a warm blanket, there was nothing else. There were no curtains on the windows, and no carpet laid over the ten tatami-sized wooden floor tiles.

“Sit down.”

Nagato said before entering the kitchen, so I knelt down beside the living room table.

The reasons a girl might have to invite a boy home while her parents were away from the house were going through my head, when Nagato, moving like a mechanical puppet, placed a tray with a small teapot and teacups on the table and sat down demurely in her school uniform, across from me.

After that, the unbearable silence.

She didn’t even pour tea for me, just sat there looking at me expressionlessly. Seeing this, I felt more and more uneasy.

“Erm… where’s your family?”

“There isn’t any.”

“Well, I see they’re not at home… have they gone out?”

“I’ve always been the only one here since the beginning.”

This is the first time I heard Nagato use such a long sentence.

“You can’t be living on your own, can you?”

“Yes.”

Wow, a first year high school girl living alone in a high class apartment! There must be some special reason for this, right? I breathed a sigh of relief when I learned that I didn’t have to meet Nagato’s parents. Wait a moment! This is not the time to be relieved!

“Oh right, what is it you want to see me for?”

As if remembering something, Nagato began pouring the tea into a cup and pushed it over to me.

“Drink.”

I obligingly started drinking the cup of tea. All this time, Nagato watched me like observing a giraffe in a zoo, so I couldn’t concentrate on drinking.

“Is it good?”

This is the first time I hear her ask a question.

“Yeah…”

After I finished, I placed the cup on the table, and Nagato refilled it instantly for me. Since she’s refilled it, I might as well drink that. Once I completed, she refilled a third cup for me. Finally, the tea pot is empty. Nagato stood up about to refill the teapot. I stopped her at once.

“There’s no need to refill tea for me anymore, can you please tell me why you brought me here?”

After I said that, Nagato stopped what she was doing and went back to her sitting position like a video rewinding itself. She still said nothing.

“What is it that can’t be said at school?” I asked probingly.

Finally, Nagato moved her thin lips.

“It’s about Suzumiya Haruhi.”

She straightened her back and sat elegantly.

“And myself.”

She paused for a while.

I really don’t understand her speaking style.

“What is it about Suzumiya and you?”

At this moment, Nagato showed a look of discomfort. This is the first time I’ve seen her show such an expression ever since I’ve met her. However, this emotional upheaval of hers is very minuscule; one has to be very observant in order to even notice.

“I cannot completely convey this in words, and there may be errors in the transmission of data. Regardless, listen.”

“Suzumiya Haruhi and I are not ordinary humans.”

Such an ambiguous sentence so early on in the conversation.

“Well, I more or less realized that already.”

“That’s not it.”

Nagato continued, glancing at her hands lying on her lap.

“I do not mean that in terms of deviations of personality, I mean what I said. She and I are not ordinary human beings like you.”

I don’t get what she’s trying to say.

7 On one of the official SH wallpapers, the term is translated as information integration thought body.

“The Integrated Data Sentient Entity[7], which oversees this galaxy, has created a Living Humanoid Interface in order to interact with biological entities - me.”

“…”

“My work is to observe Suzumiya Haruhi and upload the data obtained to the Integrated Data Sentient Entity.”

"…"

"I have been doing this since I was born three years ago. In the last three years, no particularly unusual elements were discovered, and things were very stable. However, recently an external factor has now appeared beside Suzumiya Haruhi that cannot be ignored."

"…"

"And that is you."

What is the Integrated Data Sentient Entity?

In the vast sea of data known as the universe, there exist many highly sentient data entities that possess no corporeal bodies.

These entities started out in the form of pure data. As all sorts of data gathered together, they became sentient, and finally they evolved by collecting other data.

As they exist only as data and have no corporeal bodies, they cannot be detected even with the most advanced optical devices.

As old as the universe itself, they expanded along with it, and the relative database became ever wider and larger.

Ever since the formation of this planet, sorry, it should be since the formation of this solar system, nothing in this universe is unknown to them. For them, this planet at the edge of the Milky Way is nothing special, because there are numerous planets in the galaxy with sentient organic lifeforms like this one, so numerous that they cannot be counted.

However, as the bipedal lifeform's evolution on the third planet of this solar system became a success, these lifeforms gradually acquired the mental ability to actively seek knowledge. This organic lifeform living on the planet known as Earth started to become important.

"For a long time, we have always believed it impossible for organic lifeforms, who have limited data collection and transmission ability, to be able to acquire knowledge," Nagato Yuki said in a serious tone.

"The Integrated Data Entity is very interested in all forms of organic lifeforms on Earth. It believes that by observation, it can find the solution to its own evolutionary dead end."

Unlike the data entities, who have existed since the beginning in their completed form, humans started off as incomplete organic lifeforms, rapidly evolving by expanding the data that they possessed and using this data, which is saved and enhanced, to further advance themselves.

It is normal for organic lifeforms all over the universe to become sentient, but only the humans on Earth have evolved continuously to a highly sentient level. The Integrated Data Entity was very intrigued by this, and decided to observe these humans further.

"Three years ago, we discovered a very abnormal data hotspot unlike other humans appearing on the surface of this planet. The information sparks emitted from a certain area in the bow-shaped archipelago instantly covered the whole planet and started to spread towards outer space. And the center of all that is Suzumiya Haruhi."

"We do not know why that happened, nor do we know what effects it would have. Even the data entities are unable to fully process the new data being created."

"More importantly, humans are limited in the amount of data that they can process, yet Suzumiya Haruhi was able to create a flare of data on her own."

"The release of massive amounts of data from Suzumiya Haruhi continues to happen, at completely random intervals. Furthermore, Suzumiya Haruhi seems unaware of all this herself."

"For three years, I have gone through all sorts of investigations on the individual known as Suzumiya Haruhi from all perspectives, but up to now I was still unable to discover her true identity. Concurrently, other parts of the Integrated Data Entity have determined that she is the key to the evolution of the data entities and have continued their analysis of Suzumiya Haruhi…"

"As they exist only as entities, they are incapable of speech and are thus unable to interact with organic lifeforms. But without speech, contact with humans would be impossible, hence the Integrated Data Entity has created me to act as the communication bridge between them and humans."

Finally, Nagato picked up her cup and sipped her tea. She has probably said a year's worth of words for her.

"…"

I don't know how to respond.

“The potential for self-induced evolution may lie within Suzumiya Haruhi; she may even hold the ability to control all the data around her. This is why I am here, and that is also why you are here.”

My brain is getting so confused, I interrupted:

“I’ll be honest, I don’t know what on earth you are talking about.”

“Please believe me.”

Nagato looked at me with a serious expression that I’d never seen before.

“There is a very limited amount of data that can be conveyed through speech. I am just a terminal interface for the data, living as an organic alien in order to interact with humans. I am unable to convey all the thoughts of the Integrated Data Entity to you, so please understand.”

Even if you say that, I still don’t get it!

“I don’t understand, why look to me? Let’s say I believe you are an alien created by that whatever-you-call-it entity, but why are you telling me this?”

“Because you have been specifically chosen by Suzumiya Haruhi. Whether she intends to or not, as an Absolute Data Entity, she can influence the environment around her based on her thoughts alone. There must be some reason why you have been chosen.”

“No, there isn’t!”

“There is. Perhaps for Suzumiya Haruhi, you play an important pivotal role. The endless possibilities are now in the hands of both you and Suzumiya Haruhi.”

“Are you serious?”

“Yes.”

For the first time, I carefully studied Nagato Yuki’s face. I thought she never liked talking, but now that she has opened her floodgates and let her words flow, they were all words that I could not understand. I always felt that she was queer in some way, but after hearing this speech, I discovered her queerness was beyond imagination.

8 Same as above, the official SH wallpaper coined Yuki as Humanoid Interface.

Integrated Data Sentient Entity? Living Humanoid Interface[8]?

Give me a break!

“Okay, I think you should tell this directly to Haruhi, I bet she’d be very delighted. To be frank, I’m not that interested in these topics, sorry about that.”

“The majority of the Integrated Data Entity speculates that if Suzumiya Haruhi becomes aware of her own powers and existence, an unforeseen crisis might occur; hence, at this stage we have opted to continue observing.”

“There’s a chance I’d tell all of this to Haruhi! I really don’t get it, why tell me all this?”

“Even if you tell her, it is likely she would ignore it.”

It is likely indeed.

“I’m not the only alien placed on Earth by the Integrated Data Sentient Entity. The Entity intends to take a proactive role and observe any changes in the flow of data. For Suzumiya Haruhi, you are an important person. If there is any sign of a crisis looming, I will look to you first.”

Sorry, count me out.

Please excuse me, thanks for the tea, it was nice.

Seeing me about to leave, Nagato didn’t stop me.

She lowered her head and glanced at her teacup, reverting back to her normal expressionless mode. I guess it was my imagination, but for some reason, I actually thought she looked kind of lonely.

When my mom asked me where I’d been, I gave a brief reply and went straight to my room. Lying on my bed, I began to recall everything Nagato said.

If I believed what she said, then that would make Nagato Yuki a being that is not of this world; in other words, an alien.

Isn’t this exactly the sort of mystical being that Suzumiya Haruhi has been working so hard to look for every day?

And all this time it was all right under our noses.

… Heh… Damn it! I sound like an idiot!

My eye caught the thick hardback novel that was thrown on the corner of the bed. I picked it up with the bookmark and had a glimpse at the cover art before placing it by my pillow.

Nagato must have picked up all those weird fantasies from reading all those science fiction novels all alone in her apartment for so long. She probably never talks to anyone in her class, imprisoning herself in her own mind. She ought to put down her book, get out and make some friends, and enjoy the wonderful school life. Her lack of expression is not helping in getting along with people, and she would look very cute if she'd only smile.

I think I'll return the book to her tomorrow… Forget it, since I've borrowed it, I might as well finish it.

The following day after school.

As I was on duty that day, I arrived at the club room later than usual, and the first thing I saw was Haruhi toying around with Asahina-san.

"Hold still! Damn it! Be a good girl and don't move!"

"N… nooo! H… help~~"

Haruhi had nearly stripped a struggling Asahina-san of her uniform.

"KYAA!!!"

Asahina-san screamed when she noticed me arriving.

The moment I saw Asahina-san with only her bra and panties on, I immediately turned around and shut the half-opened door.

"Sorry about that."

After waiting outside the door for ten minutes, the duet of Asahina-san's cute moans and Haruhi's ecstatic exclamations came to an end. Haruhi's voice passed through the door.

"All right, you can come in now."

As I reentered the room, I stopped in astonishment.

There greeting me inside was the sight of a beautiful maid.

Dressed in a maid costume, Asahina-san sat on the steel chair with tears in her eyes. After sadly looking at me, she lowered her head.

A white apron coupled with a wavy skirt, a blouse, and white stockings only served to make her more adorable. The lacy headband and the large butterfly-knot increased her charm.

Such an impeccable maid!

“Well? Isn’t she cute?”

Haruhi said as if praising her own handiwork, while caressing Asahina-san’s hair.

I wholeheartedly agree. No offense to poor Asahina-san, but she really does look cute in that.

“This costume’s great, isn’t it?”

“No, it isn’t!” Asahina-san protested softly, yet I pretended I didn’t hear her and turned to Haruhi.

“Why are you dressing her up as a maid?”

“Because maid costumes are sexy!”

Stop giving such ambiguous answers!

“It took me a long time to think of this, you know?”

Even if you didn’t think at all, it wouldn’t make much of a difference.

“In a play where the school is the main stage, there’s bound to be an adorable character like Mikuru-chan. In other words, the story won’t be able to take off without her, you get it? Mikuru-chan is already gentle and cute, but unless you dress such a cute schoolgirl with a great figure in a maid costume, you won’t get people’s attention. Now everyone’s going to fall in love with her when they see her. With this, we’ll be sure of victory!”

Anyway, what is it that you are trying to win, exactly?

As I was thinking of how to respond, Haruhi took out a digital camera out of nowhere and started taking souvenir shots.

Asahina-san blushed bright red and shook her head violently.

“P… please stop shooting!!!”

Asahina-sempai, you’re wasting your time begging for mercy from Haruhi, even if you bow and kneel, because she’s the sort who will carry on doing what she’s thought out, no matter what.

As expected, Haruhi had Asahina-san perform all sorts of poses for her photo session.

“Sniff…”

“Now look over here! Lower your chin a bit! Lift up your apron! Yes, that’s a good girl! Smile a bit more!”

Haruhi ceaselessly gave out her orders to Asahina-san while simultaneously pressing down on the camera shutter. If I had asked her where she got this digital camera from, she’d definitely say she’d had it “obtained” somewhere. More like stolen, I guess.

Amidst Haruhi’s photo shooting frenzy, Nagato Yuki sat in her seat reading as always. Despite her confusing conversation with me last night, seeing her usual coolness I breathed a sigh of relief.

“Kyon, your turn to shoot.”

Haruhi handed the camera to me and turned towards Asahina-san. Then, like an alligator slowly approaching an unsuspecting bird, she closed her arms around Asahina-san’s shoulders.

“Ah…”

Haruhi smiled to a shrugging Asahina-san.

“Mikuru-chan, try to look a little cuter, OK?”

That said, Haruhi proceeded to loosen Asahina-san’s ribbon, then quickly unbuttoned three buttons on her blouse. Almost instantaneously revealing Asahina-san’s large bosom.

“W-wait! No… what are you doing…!?”

“Don’t worry, it doesn’t really matter, does it?”

Of course it matters, missy!

In the end, Asahina-san was forced to place her hands on her lap and slightly lean forward. Faced with Asahina-san’s well-endowed bust, which was in stark contrast to her small body and cute face, I quickly turned my eyes away. But I wouldn’t have been able to take any pictures that way, so faced with no choice, I turned my eyes back to the camera and pressed the shutter repeatedly as Haruhi had ordered.

Poor Asahina-san was made to perform poses which further emphasized the curves on her breasts, and she was so embarrassed her face got even redder. Yet, even as she was about to cry, she still tried her clumsiest best to smile, giving out a charm never seen before.

Damn it, I think I’m quickly falling in love with her.

“Yuki-chan, lend me your glasses.”

Nagato Yuki slowly lifted her head, then slowly took off her glasses and gave them to Haruhi, and then slowly moved her gaze back to her book. Can you even read without glasses?

Haruhi took the glasses and placed them on Asahina-san's face.

"The glasses would look better if they're slightly tilted. There, that would be perfect! Kyon, remember to take more pictures of the four-eyed, innocent and well-endowed maid!"

Putting aside the argument of whether to take the photos or not, just what do you intend to do with the photos of Asahina-san in a maid costume anyway?

"Mikuru-chan, from now on you are to wear this costume every time you come for club activities!"

"How could you…"

Asahina-san tried her best to express refusal, but Haruhi grabbed her and caressed her face endlessly.

"Who asked you to be so cute? Man, even a girl like me can't resist doing this to you now!"

Asahina-san screamed and tried to escape, but to no avail, being at the mercy of Haruhi's molesting hands.

Damn, Haruhi, I'm so jealous of you. No, wait, how can I even think like that!? I should be trying to save her!

"All right, I think it's time for you to stop now!"

I tried to pull Haruhi away from her sexual harassment of Asahina-san, but she just wouldn't let go.

"That's enough, stop it already!"

"Does it matter? Why don't you join in as well?"

Not a bad idea actually, but seeing Asahina-san's face going white, I naturally said nothing.

"Whoa, what's going on here?"

Turning around, I saw Koizumi Itsuki standing at the entrance with his bag.

He looked amusedly first at Haruhi, whose hands were moving onto Asahina-san's breasts; then at me, who was trying to stop Haruhi's madness; then to Asahina-san in a maid costume, trembling nonstop; and finally to Nagato, who remained unfazed, peacefully reading her book even without her glasses.

“Is this some sort of club activity?”

“Koizumi, you came at just the right time! Let’s play with Asahina-san!”

What on earth are you talking about!?

Koizumi only grinned. Please, if you actually agree with Haruhi’s suggestions, then you’ve got some serious issues.

“No thanks, seems pretty scary to me.”

Koizumi placed his bag on the table and unfolded one of the chairs by the wall.

“Mind if I just sit and watch?”

He sat with his legs crossed and looked at me as if he were watching a parade.

“Don’t mind me. Please, continue.”

No! You got it all wrong! I’m not trying to molest Asahina-san! I’m trying to save her!

Eventually, I was able to squeeze in between Haruhi and Asahina-san, and frantically picked up Asahina-san just in time before she fell on the ground. I was amazed by how light Asahina-san was as I placed her back on her seat. Asahina-san’s maid costume was ragged and untidy, and she looked totally worn out, but honestly speaking, I thought she looked rather sexy.

“Oh well, we’ve taken plenty of photos anyway.”

Asahina-san was so exhausted that she just weakly collapsed on the table. Haruhi took off the glasses from her cute face and returned them to Nagato.

Nagato silently received the glasses, putting them back on without saying a word. It’s as though her endless speech last night never happened. She was fooling with me last night, wasn’t she?

“Right, let’s now begin the first SOS Brigade meeting!”

Haruhi, who was standing on the commander’s seat, suddenly shouted. Please stop startling people by suddenly shouting!

“Before this, we’ve already done a lot of work. Like distributing flyers and setting up the webpage, the SOS Brigade’s reputation in the school has soared sky high, so I announce phase one of the work to be a great success.”

How can making Asahina-san mentally scarred be called a success!?

“But our inbox has yet to receive a single email about any mysterious events, and no one has yet come to us to discuss their concerns with their experiences.”

Reputation alone doesn’t help a lot, since until now, not everyone knows what this club is all about. Besides, the school doesn’t even recognize this club!

“There used to be a saying that ‘patience is a virtue’, but times have changed. Even if we have to turn the earth around, we’ll find them on our own. So everyone, let’s begin searching!”

“… What are we looking for?”

Since no one else asked, I decided to do it myself.

“To find out all the mysterious events of this world! As long as we try hard, we’ll be able to find one or two events in this town!”

Your thinking is a mystery in itself, missy!

I displayed my reluctance, Koizumi only smiled enigmatically, Nagato remained wooden faced, while Asahina-san seemed resigned to her fate, too exhausted to answer. Ignoring everyone’s reactions, Haruhi waved her arms and yelled:

“This Saturday, which is tomorrow! We meet outside the north station before nine in the morning! Don’t be late! Absentees will be executed!”

Sigh, not the death penalty again?

What did Haruhi do with Asahina-san’s maid costume photos? I’m sure most of you have guessed, the stupid girl intended to upload all of them onto the webpage so that they could attract people to the website for discussion.

When I discovered this, she had just finished uploading them all on the front page to welcome visitors. She was even typing in the personal details.

Do you know what you’re doing!? This could alert a lot of people!

I tried my best to stop her foolish behavior and had all the images removed. If Asahina-san had known that images of her posing sexily in her maid costume had been spread all over the world, she’d probably faint on the spot.

I quickly warned her about the dangers of putting personal details on the web, and amazingly for once, Haruhi actually paid attention and listened to me seriously. Eventually, as if to spite me, she said rather grumpily:

“I know that already!”

She then very reluctantly allowed me to remove the images from the page. At this moment, I should have been deleting all of Asahina-san’s photos, but it would have been too much of a pity doing that. Hence, I secretly saved them all in a file document within the computer’s hard drive and had it protected with a password.

Only I can view those photos!

Chapter 4

What kind of joke is this!? Asking us to meet at nine in the morning on a weekend! Despite that, though, I still pedaled hard on my bike towards the station. I'm so hopeless!

Being located in the center of town, Kitaguchi Station acts as an important railway hub, and every weekend, the square in front of the station is packed with window-shopping youngsters. Apart from going to a larger city, there's really not much to do in this town besides going to the mall near the station. It always amazes me how people can live normal lives in this town with so little to do.

Randomly placing my bike at the closed entrance to the bank, I ran to the turnstiles on the north entrance of the station. It was still five minutes to nine, but everyone else had arrived.

Haruhi turned her head and said.

"You're late! You've got to be fined!"

"But it's not nine yet."

"Even if you didn't arrive late, the last person to arrive still has to be punished. That's the rule!"

"How come I never heard that rule before?"

"Because I just thought it up!"

Dressed in a long sleeved T-shirt and a short denim skirt, Haruhi looked very cheerful.

"You'll have to treat all of us to drinks."

Placing her arms on her waist with ease, Haruhi looked much more approachable than her usual scowling self. Unable to argue, I obligingly agreed to her command and led everyone to a nearby café.

Asahina-san was dressed in a white sleeveless one-piece dress with a light blue knitted shirt on top. Her long wavy hair was clipped at the back of her head with a hair clip. Every time she moved, it would bounce slightly, making her look cute. Her smile gave her an impression of a well cultured cute young lady. Even her handbag looked trendy.

Standing next to me, Koizumi wore a pink shirt with a jacket on top, as well as sporting a bright red necktie, making him look very formal. I was irritated but I had to admit he looked rather cool, plus he's taller than me.

Nagato, as usual, stood in the back wearing her sailor uniform. Even though she completely viewed herself as a member of the SOS Brigade, technically she was still with the Literature Club. Hearing her say all those strange things to me the other night made me even more

concerned about her cool expression. By the way, why was she wearing a school uniform even on the weekends?

As the Mystery Five walked into the café by the roundabout and sat down in our chairs, the waitress started taking our orders. Only Nagato studied the menu seriously - still no expression displayed, of course - taking her time to decide. Honestly, the time it took for her to decide on what to drink was enough to cook a bowl of ramen!

“Almond tea.” She finally said.

It doesn’t matter what you order, anyway, as I’m the one who’s paying.

Haruhi made the following suggestions:

We would split into two parties. If any of us were to find anything that looked mysterious we were to contact each other at once by cell phone then meet up to discuss what to do next. Once it was all over a debriefing would be held to review and prepare for further developments.

That was all.

“Now, let’s draw lots!”

Haruhi took five toothpicks from the toothpick stand, then using a pen she borrowed from the waitress, she marked two of the toothpicks. She then wrapped her fingers around the toothpicks for us to draw.

I drew a marked one; so did Asahina-san, who said while looking at her marked toothpick, “Hmm, what a combination, huh…”

For some reason, Haruhi coldly glared at me and Asahina-san, and then yelled, “Kyon, you listen, this is not a date! Be serious, you understand?”

“OK already!”

Did I just show my thoughts to her? Nevertheless, this is great! I danced with joy inside as I saw Asahina-san stare at the marked toothpick blushing furiously. Oh yes!

“What exactly are we looking for?” Koizumi asked nonchalantly, while Nagato drank her tea methodically.

Finishing the last drop of iced coffee, Haruhi lightly flicked the hair behind her ears.

“Anything that looks suspicious. Anything or anyone that looks funny. Also look for portals that can lead to a different dimensions and aliens disguised as humans.”

I nearly spat out the mint tea I was drinking. That's strange, why does Asahina-san have the same expression? Of course, Nagato remains the same as always.

"I see." Koizumi said.

Are you sure you really understand?

"So, all we need to do is to look for aliens, time travelers and espers with super-natural powers, and the traces they left behind on earth. I fully understand." Koizumi said cheerfully.

"That's right! You really are a bright person, Koizumi-kun! It's just like you said! Kyon, you should learn from him!"

Stop feeding her ego! Annoyed, I looked at Koizumi who only smiled back at me and nodded.

"Alright! Let's go!"

Haruhi shoved the bill at me and strode out of the café.

Though I've said this many times, I've still got to say it:

"Oh boy."

Remember, this is not a date! If I find you going off to have fun with her, I'll kill you! So Haruhi said, going off with Koizumi and Nagato. We headed East and West respectively. I still don't know what is it we're supposed to look for.

"What should we do?"

Asahina-san looked at me, clutching her bag with her hands. I wanted to go home but knew it was impossible. So, I pretended to think for a while before saying, "It's pointless just standing here, so let's take a walk around."

"OK."

Asahina-san obligingly walked with me. She was hesitant when walking with me shoulder to shoulder. Every time when she accidentally bumped into my shoulder she would recoil shyly. She looked so innocent like that. We followed a path by the riverbank and aimlessly headed north. If we had come a month ago, we could've still enjoyed the blooming of cherry blossom trees, but now it's just a plain riverside walk.

As this is a popular spot for walking there are many families and couples walking along. If one didn't know, they would think we're a young couple, and not a group looking for something mysterious.

Looking at the riverside, Asahina-san murmured softly to herself, “This is the first time I’ve had a walk like this!”

“What do you mean?”

“……That is, with a guy, just the two of us……”

“That really surprises me. Could it be that you’ve never gone out with a guy before?”

“No…”

I turned towards Asahina-san whose soft hair was lightly fluttering in the wind and asked, “Wow! But there are plenty of guys who’ve confessed to you, right?”

“Um…”

Asahina-san shyly lowered her head. “But, it can’t work. I can’t involve myself in a relationship with anyone, at least not at this time…”

She went quiet suddenly. As I waited for her to continue, three merry couples walked by.

“Kyon-kun…”

I was already counting the number of leaves that had fallen on the river when Asahina-san called to me.

Asahina-san looked at me abashedly, and then, bracing herself, she said, “I have something to tell you.”

Her round, deer-like eyes revealed her strong determination.

We sat on a bench by the cherry blossom trees and for a long time Asahina-san didn’t speak. She lowered her head and muttered, “Where should I begin? I’m not good at explaining things. Maybe he won’t believe me.”

Finally she lifted her head and started talking in a slightly embarrassed tone. “I’m not from this time and age. I am a person from the future. I can’t tell you when I arrived from, or from which temporal plane. I wouldn’t be able to anyway, even if I wanted to. Conveying any information regarding the future with any person from the past is strictly forbidden - and that’s why - before boarding the time machine I had to go through stringent mental conditioning. If I intended to say anything that shouldn’t be said, my memory concerning that information would be sealed.”

Asahina-san took a deep breath and continued, “Unlike the water flowing in a river, every time frame is made up of different two-dimensional flat planes.”

“You lost me from the beginning.”

“Hmm, how about this, try to imagine it like a cartoon. When we’re watching a cartoon we see the characters within move seamlessly but, in fact, they’re all created from a series of still images. Similarly, time is like that, a digitized version. But if I use a series of still images as a description, maybe you’ll understand better.”

“Between one time frame and another there are so-called temporal fault lines. They do exist, even though the frequency of the fault lines is near zero; so, there is no continuity between different time frames. Time traveling is the attempt to make a three-dimensional movement between the two-dimensional temporal planes. For me who has arrived from the future to this temporal plane, it is like adding an extra object, drawn onto the still image. Even if I attempted to change history in this age it would not affect the future, because there is no continuity between the time frames. Everything would stay in this temporal plane. It’s like trying to add a few words on a still image from hundreds of still images: the overall story wouldn’t be affected, right?”

“Time is unlike this river here: every moment belongs to a digitized temporal plane. Are you following me now?”

I hesitated on whether to place my hand on my forehead, which I eventually did. Temporal plane, digitized. These terms don’t matter to me, but, what’s with the time traveling?

Asahina-san glanced at the toes on her sandals and continued, “Let me tell you the reason I’ve come to this temporal plane…”

A couple with a young child passed by us at that moment.

“Three years ago we detected the occurrence of a huge time-quake. Hmm, it should be around three years before today, just when Suzumiya-san entered junior high. We were shocked when we traveled back to investigate, because we were unable to travel any further into the past.”

How come it’s three years ago again?

“We came to a conclusion that there exists a massive temporal fault line, but we don’t know why it only appears at that specific time frame. It’s only recently that we discovered the reason…sorry, I meant recently for the age that I came from.”

“…And why is that?”

The culprit couldn’t be her, could it?

“It’s because of Suzumiya-san.”

Asahina-san said the words I didn’t want to hear.

“She is located right at the center of the fourth dimension. Please don’t ask me why, since it’s forbidden, so I can’t tell you. However, we’re certain that it’s Suzumiya-san who has blocked the passage for traveling to the past.”

“…I don’t think Haruhi is capable of such a thing…”

“Neither did I. Honestly, it’s impossible for a normal human to interfere with the temporal planes. This is still an unsolved mystery, and Suzumiya-san herself is unaware that she is the source of all the temporal distortions and time-quakes. I came to Suzumiya-san’s side so that I could closely observe any new changes to the temporal planes…I’m sorry, I couldn’t find any better words to describe it, let’s just say I’m in charge of surveillance.”

“……” I was too speechless to respond.

“You don’t believe me, do you?”

“No…right, so why are you telling me this?”

“Because you have been chosen by Suzumiya-san.”

Asahina turned and faced me,

“I can’t go into the details. But, if I’ve guessed correctly, you are a very important person to Suzumiya-san. There is a reason for everything that she does.”

“Then Nagato-san and Koizumi are…”

“They are similar to me, but Suzumiya-san is still unaware that she is the one who has gathered us to her side.”

“Then do you know what they are?”

“That’s classified information.”

“What would happen if we just leave Haruhi alone?”

“Classified information.”

“Since you’re from the future, you should know what happens next, right?”

“Classified information.”

“What if I told Haruhi all this?”

“Classified information.”

"…"

"I'm sorry, I really can't tell you. Especially right now, since I don't have the right to do so."

Asahina-san said with an apologetic look on her face.

"It doesn't matter even if you don't believe me; I'd just like to let you know about this."

I remember hearing the same things being said inside a dull, quiet apartment.

"I'm sorry."

Seeing that I was silent, Asahina-san's eyes look depressingly red.

"I'm so sorry, for suddenly telling you all this."

"It's okay, really……"

First there's Nagato telling me she's a Living Humanoid Interface created by aliens, now there's Asahina-san claiming she's from the future. How am I supposed to believe that? Somebody, help me!

When I placed my hand on the bench, I accidentally touched Asahina-san's hand. Even though I only brushed her tiny fingers, Asahina-san retracted her fingers as fast as lightning, and lowered her head.

We then silently stared at the river.

Time passed by.

"Asahina-san."

"Yes…?"

"Can I pretend this conversation never happened? Whether I believe you or not, let's put this aside for now."

"OK."

A smile came from Asahina-san's face. It was a very beautiful smile.

"As things go, this is the best solution. Please treat me as you have always done, I'm counting on you."

That said, Asahina-san bowed deeply to me. Hey, there's no need to go so far!

“Can I ask you one thing?”

“What is it?”

“Please tell me your real age.”

“Classified information~”

Asahina smiled naughtily.

Afterwards, we took a stroll around the streets. Despite Haruhi’s pleas not to go on a date, I didn’t intend to follow them. We went window shopping at the fashion stores in the mall, merrily ate some ice cream, and had a look around the souvenir stalls by the street side……the typical things a couple would do to kill time. It would have been perfect if only we could hold each other’s hands…

At this moment my cell phone rang: it was Haruhi.

“We’ll meet at noon, at the station where we met this morning.”

She hung up after saying that. I looked at my watch, and it was already eleven fifty. There’s no way we’re going to make it!

“Was it Suzumiya-san? What’d she say?”

“She said we need to meet again at noon, so we’d better hurry!”

I grabbed Asahina-san’s hand, knowing that we had no chance to make it by noon unless we ran, and we took off running towards the station. What reaction would Haruhi have, If she saw us running hand in hand? I wonder. I guess she’d go insane.

“So, any results?” Haruhi questioned us, as we arrived.

We were ten minutes late, and that was the first thing Haruhi said when she saw us. She seemed rather pissed.

“Did you find anything?”

“Nothing.”

“Did you really even look? You didn’t just stroll around, did you? What about Mikuru-chan?”

Asahina-san shook her head.

“Then what have you guys found?”

Haruhi went silent. Koizumi, standing behind her, scratched his head, while Nagato stood motionlessly.

After a few moments of no one saying anything Haruhi nearly growled, “Let’s have lunch first then we’ll continue after that.”

You still want to continue!?

As we had our lunch in a burger shop Haruhi said it was time to draw lots again, and drew out some extra toothpicks she’d nicked from the café earlier in the morning. She was really well prepared!

Koizumi swiftly picked a toothpick.

“Unmarked again.”

Such white teeth! I always get the feeling this guy is always smiling!

“So is mine.”

Asahina-san showed me the toothpick she just drawn.

“What about Kyon-kun?”

“Sadly, mine is marked.”

Haruhi seemed to get more and more moody and rushed Nagato into drawing a toothpick.

In the end, Nagato and I were grouped together, while the other three were in the other group.

“…”

Haruhi glared at the unmarked toothpick as if staring at the person who killed her father, then turned towards me and Nagato, who was busy eating her cheeseburger, and scowled.

Why are you so mad?

“We’ll meet in front of the station by four. Be sure to find something by then!”

She finished her drink in one gulp, after saying that.

This time we went South and North, with my group in charge of the south side. Before we parted, Asahina-san waved one of her little hands at me. It made me feel so warm!

Now it was just me and Nagato standing idly in front of the busy station.

“What should we do?”

“……” Nagato said nothing.

“…Let’s go.”

I strode forward, and found that she started following. It seems I’m beginning to get used to hanging out with her now.

“Nagato, about the stuff you told me the other day…”

“What about it?”

“I’m starting to believe it a little.”

“Is that so?”

“Yeah.”

“……”

So under this empty atmosphere we silently walked around the station.

“Don’t you have any casual clothing?”

“……”

“What do you do on holidays?”

“……”

“Are you happy now?”

“……”

That’s how our conversation went for that day.

There was no point walking around aimlessly so I took Nagato to a new library by the seaside that was built at the same time the authorities developed the land for the station. I’d never been

inside before, as I rarely borrowed any books. However, I thought I could get some rest when we got inside, only to discover that every seat was occupied. These people probably also have nowhere else to go in their free time. I glanced around the library, looking a bit lost, while Nagato had already drifted towards the bookshelves like she was sleep walking. Let her do what she likes!

I used to read often. When I was in elementary school, my mom used to borrow illustrated books from the children's book section for me to read. There were all sorts of books, but I remember that all the ones I'd read were quite interesting. However, I can't remember any of their names anymore. When did I stop reading? When did reading start becoming boring for me?

I randomly picked up a book from the bookshelf and quickly flipped through a few pages, before putting it back and then picking up another book. It would take me forever to find an interesting book in this sea of books, if I didn't do any research. Thinking like that, I wandered between the bookshelves, aimlessly.

As I headed to look for Nagato, I found her reading in front of a bookshelf of thick hardback books. She really does love thick hardback books!

Finally, after seeing a man reading his newspaper get up from his chair, I went and sat down, carrying a novel that I had randomly picked. It's impossible trying to read a book I never intended on reading. A while later, I found myself getting drowsy, and fell asleep.

At that moment my hip pocket suddenly vibrated.

"WHOA!?"

I jumped in astonishment. When I saw everyone frowning at me, I remembered that I was in a library. Wiping the drool off my face I rushed out of the library and answered my cell phone, which was set to vibration mode.

"You idiot! What have you been doing!?"

A deafening sound roared through my ear. Thanks to this I awoke from my drowsiness.

"What time do you think it is now?"

"Sorry, I just woke up just now!"

"What!? You dumbass!"

You are the least qualified to call me a dumbass!

I looked at my watch and it was past half past four. She said we were to meet at four!

"Get your asses over here at once! I give you thirty seconds!"

Stop making demands that are impossible to achieve!

After Haruhi roughly hung-up the phone I placed my phone back in my pocket and returned to the library. There I found Nagato still standing there, reading what seemed like a thick encyclopedia.

The following was a bit tricky. It took quite some time trying to move Nagato - who seemed rooted to the spot - and then we had to go to the counter to fill in a form to borrow the book. During that time I ignored all of Haruhi's phone calls.

When we returned to the station, with Nagato carrying a thick philosophical book like a well-treasured item, written by some foreign author whose name was very hard to pronounce, the three people waiting there all had different reactions. Asahina-san, looking exhausted, smiled with a sigh of relief; Koizumi shrugged his shoulders like an idiot; while Haruhi yelled as though she'd just drank some cold soup.

"You're late; pay the fine!"

Do I have to treat you guys again?

Finally, we ended today's outdoor activity, after wasting our time and my money.

"I'm so tired! Suzumiya-san walked so fast that I had a tough time keeping up." Asahina-san told me as we parted, and then she whispered in my ear, "Thanks for listening to what I said today." She then lowered her head and smiled shyly.

Do people from the future all smile so elegantly?

"Then, see you!" Asahina-san waved goodbye and left. Koizumi softly patted my shoulder and said, "That was fun today! How should I say this? Suzumiya-san really is an interesting person. It's a pity I couldn't be with you today, perhaps next time."

After Koizumi left with that annoying grin of his, I discovered Nagato had left already.

That left Haruhi staring at me.

"What have you been doing all day today?"

"Hmm, what have I been doing today?"

"You can't go on like that!"

Looks like she's really pissed.

“Oh yeah, what about you? You found anything interesting?”

Haruhi bit her lip and said nothing. If I didn’t stop her she would bite it until her lips bled.

“Well, it’s not like they’d be so careless as to let you discover them in one day.”

Seeing me trying to lighten the mood Haruhi turned her eyes away quickly.

“We’ll have a debriefing the day after tomorrow, in school.”

Haruhi turned and walked into the crowd, without looking back.

With the thought of finally being able to go home, I returned to the bank, only to discover my bike was missing. Replacing it was a sign on the lamppost saying, “Your bicycle has been towed away as a result of illegal parking.”

Chapter 5

9 First published in 1908 as *L'Oiseau bleu*, this is a children's play by Belgian poet, playwright and Nobel laureate Maurice Polydore-Marie-Bernard Maeterlinck (1862-1949). Like Tanigawa Nagaru, Maeterlinck first studied law, then turned to literature.
In the play, two children, a boy and a girl, are sent forth by a fairy, to seek the mystical Blue Bird of Happiness. On their journey, they visit numerous locales symbolic of human thought and emotion, including the Land of Memory, the Palace of Night and the Kingdom of the Future. The children's quest is futile, but returning home, they find that the Blue Bird has been in the cage all along. The moral is that happiness can be found at home, and that the journey is as important as the goal.

Monday came, and the humidity of the rainy season made itself gradually felt at school, increasing to the point where we were sweating buckets. If some politician had made a campaign promise to install an escalator on the hill road, they'd have been assured of my vote once I become eligible.

I was sitting in the classroom, fanning my neck with a pencilboard as a substitute for a fan, when the bell rang and Haruhi, unusually, was the last to enter.

Throwing her bag on the desk, she said, "I'd like to be fanned, too."

"Do it yourself!"

Haruhi, whom I'd parted with in front of the station, two days previously, twisted her face into a sour look, pouting. Just when I'd thought her expressions were getting cuter these days, she'd reverted back to her usual scowling self today.

"Say, Suzumiya. Do you know the story of the 'Blue Bird of Happiness'[9]?"

"What's that?"

"No, never mind, it's nothing."

"Well, then don't ask."

Haruhi gave me a sideways scowl, then Okabe-sensei arrived and homeroom session began.

In class that day, an aura of sullenness radiated to all sides from Haruhi's downer[10], emitting a discomforting pressure against my back. Never before had the chime at the end of the day sounded so comforting. Like a field mouse fleeing from a raging brush fire, I evacuated to the clubroom.

10 The original text does, in fact, say "downer": ハルヒのダウナー (Haruhi no DAUNAA)

The reading figure of Nagato is now the default scenery in the clubroom, to the extent that she seems to be a fixed ornament in the room.

That said, I turned and said to Koizumi Itsuki, who had already arrived,

“Don’t tell me you too have something to say to me about Suzumiya?”

It’s just the three of us in this place. Haruhi has cleaning duty for today, while Asahina-san has yet to arrive.

“Ah, judging by your reaction, I guess the other two girls have approached you already.”

Koizumi took a quick glance at Nagato, busy reading her book as usual. I found his know-it-all tone quite annoying.

“Let’s find another place to talk. It would be troublesome if Suzumiya-san hears us.”

Koizumi and I went to the cafeteria and sat at one of the tables. On the way, Koizumi even bought a cup of hot coffee for me. I know it’s odd for two guys to share the same cafeteria table, but that can’t be helped.

“How much do you know?”

“That Suzumiya isn’t an ordinary person, I guess.”

“That makes things easy for me. You are correct.”

Was this some kind of joke? All of the other three members of the SOS Brigade have told me that Suzumiya isn’t human. Has global warming heated their brains so much that they short-circuited?

“First, tell me who you really are.”

Since one has told me she’s an alien while the other a time traveler, I already had an idea, so I followed,

“You’re not gonna tell me that you’re an esper, are you?”

“Now, there’s no need to assume!”

Koizumi shook his cup softly.

“While not exactly accurate, you’re more or less correct - I am what you call an esper. That’s right, I possess paranormal powers.”

I drank my coffee in silence. Mmm, too sweet, he should’ve bought it with less sugar.

“I’d have preferred not to transfer to this school so suddenly, but there has been a change in circumstances. I never thought those two girls would have approached Suzumiya Haruhi so quickly already. Before that, they had always been silently observing her.”

Stop treating Haruhi like some treasured endangered species!

Noticing that I was frowning, he continued,

“Now calm down. We’re trying our best as well! We have no intentions of harming Suzumiya-san, rather, we want to protect her from danger.”

“You said we? That means there are other espers like you?”

“Well, there aren’t quite as many as you think. Since I am among the lowest-ranked, I don’t really know much, I only know there are about ten in this world. All are under the supervision of the ‘Organization’”.

Great, now we have an ‘Organization’!

“I do not know what the ‘Organization’ consists of, or how many members there are. Everything seems to be run by the bigwigs higher up.”

“……So, this secret group, this ‘Organization’, what does it do anyway?”

Koizumi wet his lips with the cooled coffee.

“Just as you have guessed, the ‘Organization’ was founded three years ago, and their priority is to observe Suzumiya Haruhi. To put it bluntly, they exist solely to observe Suzumiya Haruhi. I’m sure you understand by now? I’m not the only ‘Organization’ member here in this school. There have already been a number who have infiltrated here before me; I’ve just been temporarily transferred here to assist them.”

I suddenly thought of Taniguchi’s face. He said he’s been in the same class as Haruhi since junior high. Could he be an esper like Koizumi as well?

“You’re joking, right?”

Koizumi pretended not to hear that and continued,

“However, I can’t guarantee that they’re all on Suzumiya-san’s side.”

Why does everyone like Haruhi? She’s just an eccentric, crazy girl that creates trouble for other people, not to mention, she’s extremely self-centered. Is she really worth having an ‘Organization’ using all its resources to protect? Though I must admit she is attractive in looks.

“I don’t know what really happened three years ago. All I do know is, I suddenly realized I possessed paranormal powers one day three years ago. I was really scared, I didn’t know what to do. Luckily for me, it wasn’t long before the ‘Organization’ took me in, or I would’ve killed myself thinking something is wrong with my brain.”

I had already been thinking something must be wrong with your brain ever since that time.

“Well, that’s not impossible. Though we’re more afraid of the terrible unforeseeable possibilities that exist.”

Smiling at his own flaws, Koizumi sipped his cup of coffee, and then started giving me a serious look.

“When do you think this world began its existence?”

He asked quite a shocking question all of a sudden.

“Didn’t it begin at the Big Bang?”

“Right now that’s what’s being said. However, for us there is another possibility - this world came into being three years ago.”

I looked at Koizumi’s face again and again. What he was saying was too absurd to be true.

“That’s impossible! I can still clearly remember what happened three years ago. Besides, my parents are still alive. I still have the three stitches I got from falling into a drain when I was young. And how do you explain all the stuff that I’ve been memorizing like hell from the history textbooks?”

“OK, then how can you be sure that all humans, including you, are not created with their earlier memories? If that’s the case, then there’s no need to dwell on three years ago. There is no evidence in this world to disprove that the world didn’t begin five minutes ago, and that all life began there.”

“……”

“For example, try to imagine a virtual reality. Your brain has been plugged by electric wires, everything that you see, smell and even touch are actually all transmitted by the electric signals from the wires to your brain, yet you yourself believe that what you’re experiencing is real. This so called ‘real world’ is actually surprisingly fragile.”

“……Let’s say I agree with what you said, it doesn’t matter whether the Earth was formed three years ago or five minutes ago. The thing is, what does your ‘Organization’s’ existence have to do with Haruhi?”

“The leader of the ‘Organization’ believes that this world is really a person’s dream. We, no, it should be the whole world itself is all but a dream. Because it’s just a dream, for that person, to create and alter this reality we’re in is as simple as clockwork. And we all know who this person is.”

Perhaps it’s his referential use of words, but Koizumi’s face looks surprisingly mature.

“Humans have called those who can create and destroy the world at will as God.”

……Hey, Haruhi! You’ve become a god already, oh my god! (Pun intended.)

“That’s why the ‘Organization’ has always been very careful. If God becomes displeased with this world, she could just completely destroy the old world and replace it with a new one. Just like a kid who doesn’t like his sandcastle and decides to demolish it and build a new one. Even though I feel there are numerous unresolved conflicts in this world, there’s still some good in this world that makes it worth living in. This is why I’ve assisted the ‘Organization’ in protecting this world.”

“Why don’t you just go and directly ask Haruhi? Tell her to stop destroying this world, she might even listen.”

“Of course, Suzumiya-san doesn’t know that, she’s not aware of her own powers. Our job is to make sure she never does, and lives her life peacefully.”

Koizumi began smiling once again after saying all that.

“As of right now, she’s still an incomplete god, unable to completely control the world at will. Even though she hasn’t completely evolved, we’ve already seen some signs of it.”

“How do you know?”

“Think about it. Why would espers like me, as well as people like Asahina Mikuru and Nagato Yuki exist? It is because Suzumiya-san wishes for it.”

If anyone here is an alien, a time traveler, slider, or an esper, then come find me!

I instantly remembered Haruhi’s self introduction at the beginning of the semester.

“Since she hasn’t discovered them yet, she is unable to completely utilize her powers, she could only subconsciously release them randomly. Yet for the past few months, Suzumiya-san has continuously released powers far beyond what humans can comprehend. As you well know, this resulted in Suzumiya-san having Asahina Mikuru, Nagato Yuki and even me joining her club.”

Does that make me the sole outsider?

“Not quite. For us, you’re a mysterious presence. I’ve done quite a lot of background checks on you, I hope you don’t mind. And I can assure you, you are just a normal human being without any special powers.”

Should I take that as a compliment or should I be disappointed?

“I don’t know either, but the fate of the world could very well rest in your hands. Therefore, you need to be careful not to let Suzumiya-san feel any despair for this world.”

“Since you think Haruhi is God,” I suggested, “Why don’t you just abduct her, perform an autopsy on her and see what her brain’s made of? You might even learn the secrets of the universe!”

“There do exist some extremists within the ‘Organization’ who believe the same way as you do.”

Koizumi nodded while adding,

“Yet the majority still think it best to leave her alone. After all, if God becomes unhappy because of this, a catastrophe would most likely occur. We hope for the world to remain as it is, so naturally we hope that Suzumiya-san can live peacefully. We have nothing to gain if disaster does strike……”

“……Then what should we do?”

“That I do not know.”

“Oh yeah, what would happen to the world if Haruhi suddenly dies?”

“Would the world be destroyed alongside her death? Or would God simply cease to exist? Or a new one would simply come to replace her? Before that happens, no one really knows.”

The coffee in the paper cup had become cold. I shoved it aside as I didn’t want to drink anymore.

“You said you possess paranormal powers?”

“Well, that’s not quite precise, but more or less you’re correct.”

“Then show me some of your powers, then I’ll believe you. Let’s say, make this coffee warm again.”

Koizumi smiled cheerfully. This is the first time I’ve seen him truly smile.

“I’m sorry, I can’t do that. My powers aren’t that easily comprehensible. Under normal conditions, I don’t have any particular powers. I have to satisfy a certain number of conditions before I can use them, but I believe you’ll get the chance to see them one day.”

“Sorry I’ve taken your time, I guess I’ll go home now.” After saying that, Koizumi left with a smile.

I watched Koizumi stroll away until he disappeared, then I thought of grabbing the paper cup.

Just as I thought, the coffee’s still cold.

When I returned to the club room, I stumbled upon Asahina-san standing inside in her bra and panties.

“……”

Asahina-san, with the maid costume in her hands, stood with her eyes wide open, looking at me frozen to the spot with my hand on the door knob. Slowly her mouth started to open as she prepared to scream.

“I’m sorry.”

Before she had the chance to yell, I pulled out the foot that was in the room and shut the door quickly. Thanks to that, I was able to avoid her screaming.

Really, I ought to knock first. No wait, she ought to lock the door if she wanted to change!

Just as I was wondering whether to store that image of her smooth white half-naked body into my long-term memory banks, a soft knock came from the other side of the door, “You can enter now……”

“Sorry about that.”

“It doesn’t matter……”

I looked at Asahina-san’s lowered head as she opened the door and apologized. She blushed and said,

“Sorry, I always show my embarrassing side……”

I don’t really mind at all actually.

She’s really quite an obedient girl, wearing her maid costume as Haruhi told her to.

She’s just too cute!

I was afraid if I continued to stare at Asahina-san like that, the image I had just received would begin to tilt towards the dirty side. Mustering all the reason I had to take on those frustrating desires, I swiftly sat in the commander's seat and turned on the computer.

Noticing someone watching me, I lifted my head, I found Nagato Yuki actually looking at me for a change. She pushed her glasses up slightly, then returned to her book. Her moves are quite human.

I opened the net browser and went to the club homepage, trying to edit something out of the ever static page, but I didn't know where to start. I used to think editing webpages was a waste of time, and I would close the window and sigh. Yet here I was bored as hell, I've gotten tired of Othello as well, I needed something to kill time.

As I muttered under my breath with my arms crossed, suddenly someone placed a cup of warm tea in front of me. I glanced upwards and found Asahina-san in her maid costume smiling while standing with a tray in her hands. She's completely like a real maid.

"Thanks."

I just got treated to a cup of hot coffee by Koizumi, but I still gladly accepted this cup of warm tea.

Asahina-san then placed another cup by Nagato's side, she then sat beside her and silently sipped her own cup of tea.

In the end, Haruhi never came to the club room that day.

"Why didn't you come yesterday? Didn't you want to hold a debriefing?"

As usual, I turned and spoke to Haruhi behind me before the homeroom session.

Lying flat on the desk, with her chin on the surface, Haruhi said with an annoyed look,

"You're annoying! I've already had the debriefing on my own yesterday already!"

I knew right away that Haruhi must have retraced the places she went last Saturday after school.

"I was afraid I might have missed something, so I thought it safer to go through the places again."

I'd always thought it was only detectives who believed criminals would return to the scene of crime, but I was wrong.

“It’s hot as hell! When is the school gonna switch uniforms? I want to wear short sleeves!”

They don’t change seasons till June, and there’s only one week left till May finishes.

“Suzumiya, maybe I’ve said this before, but I think you’d better stop looking for those mysterious events, and try to live a normal high school life.”

She would lift her head and scowl at me……I was anticipating that kind of reaction, yet Haruhi’s head remained stuck on the desk. It seems she’s really exhausted.

“A normal high school life? What kind of life is that?”

She doesn’t sound interested at all.

“Something like finding a decent boyfriend. You might even stumble upon an alien while you’re dating. That’ll be two birds with one stone, that’s not too bad, right?”

I started thinking about Asahina-san’s conversation with me that day while making such a suggestion.

“Besides, there are plenty of guys lining up for you. All you need is to hold back that eccentric behavior of yours and your boyfriend will arrive.”

“Hmph, it doesn’t matter if I have a boyfriend or not! All this so-called love is just a temporary confusion of the mind, a mental illness.”

Haruhi said exhaustedly while lying on the desk and looking out the window.

“Actually, I do tend to think about this stuff from time to time. I am an energetic girl after all, plus my body has its needs. But I’m not dumb enough to take on this troublesome stuff just because of a short moment of confusion. And if I’m too busy dating, what happens to the SOS Brigade? I just founded it!”

Technically it’s not founded yet.

“Then why not create a club that involves some form of entertainment? That would attract more members for sure.”

“No.”

Haruhi flatly refused.

“I founded the SOS Brigade because all the other normal clubs were too boring, and I’ve recruited a cute girl like Mikuru-chan and a mysterious transfer student as well! Why hasn’t anything happened yet? Sigh, it’s about time something strange happened.”

This is the first time I've seen Haruhi this depressed, but she's cute like that too. For a cute girl like her, she's pretty enough even when she's not smiling, it's such a pity, the more I think about it.

Haruhi spent the rest of the day sleeping soundly. What's amazing is, the teachers never noticed……No, this has to be a coincidence.

Yet from this moment, strange things were quietly beginning. Since it wasn't a big deal at the beginning, no one else had noticed yet, but I'd been thinking about it all day ever since homeroom session.

While I was speaking to Haruhi, my mind was dwelling on something else. It all began with a note that was left in my shoe locker this morning.

The note said,

"After school when everyone else has left, come to the 1-5 classroom."

It was obviously a girl's handwriting.

What is this all about? An emergency conference was held in my mind between my differing opinions.

The first said, "this has happened before," but the handwriting was different from the one on the bookmark. Nagato, who claims to be a Living Humanoid Interface for the aliens, has handwriting so beautiful it's as though it's printed, yet this note gives the impression of a high school girl's handwriting. Besides, Nagato would not be so direct as to stick a note in my shoe locker.

The second said, "could it be Asahina-san?" No, if it's Asahina-san, she wouldn't just randomly tear a piece of paper and scribble down a note without writing any time on it. That's right, she would have placed her well-written letter into an envelope.

Moreover, it was strange that the location is in my classroom. "It can't be Haruhi!?" said the third opinion. That's even more impossible, if it were her, she would have just dragged me to the staircase and told me right away if she wanted me to know something.

Based on the same reasoning, I eliminated Koizumi from the equation as well. Finally, a fourth opinion said, "Could it be a love letter from some stranger?" Let's not worry ourselves whether this is a love letter or not, the thing is I'm being called out by someone, and it doesn't even have to be a girl.

“Don’t fall for it! It’s most likely a prank by Taniguchi and Kunikida.” Yes, that’s the most plausible opinion. It’s possible that that idiot Taniguchi would play such senseless pranks, but he should’ve written more.

I walked aimlessly around school while thinking about all these. After class, Haruhi said she was sick and went home. This is a great chance!

I decided to go to the club room first. I’d go crazy if I went too early to the classroom to wait for some unknown stranger. Plus, if all of a sudden Taniguchi suddenly came in and said, “Yo, you still waiting? I can’t believe you’d fall for such a small note, how innocent you are!” I’d be mightily pissed. Kill some time first, go and have a peek in the classroom, and then go in after making sure no one is around. Yes, this is the perfect strategy!

I arrived at the club room entrance on my own. This time I remembered to knock.

“Please come in.”

Once I confirmed it was Asahina-san’s voice, I opened the door. No matter how many times I look at it, Asahina just looks so adorable in her maid costume!

“Took you awhile to arrive, where’s Suzumiya-san?”

Looks like she’s brewing tea again.

“She went home, she seems really tired. If you want to exact revenge, now’s the chance, right now she seems very weak.”

“I’m not going to do any such thing!”

We sat face to face and drank our tea in the room with Nagato reading. We seem to have reverted back to the same aimless association as before.

“Koizumi still hasn’t arrived?”

“Koizumi-kun came earlier, he said he’s got part-time work today, so he went off first.”

What kind of part-time work? But as things stand, I can now confidently cross out Koizumi and Haruhi from my suspect list on who wrote the note.

Since we didn’t have anything to do, I played some Othello with Asahina-san and chatted with her. After winning three games, we stopped playing and went to surf the internet to read the news, and at this moment, Nagato closed her book. Recently, we’ve taken this action of hers as a sign that it’s time to call it a day for club activities (though we don’t know what activities there are), and we all began to pack and leave.

“I need to change, so you go on first.” Hearing Asahina-san say that, I rushed out of the club room.

The clock pointed to half past five, there shouldn’t be anyone left in the classroom, I guess? Even if it were a prank by Taniguchi, he would have gone home after getting bored from waiting so long. Despite that, I still ran up the two flights of stairs to the top floor, just to make sure.

I breathed deeply in the silent corridor. Since the classroom windows are all stained, there’s no way I’d be able to see what’s going on inside, just that the sunset has colored the room orange-red. I casually opened the 1-5 classroom door and stuck my head inside.

I wasn’t at all surprised that someone was waiting inside the classroom, but I was shocked when I found out who it was. Standing in front of the blackboard is a person who I would not have thought of at all.

“You’re late.”

Asakura Ryouko smiled.

She flicked her silky long hair and started walking down the aisle. Her smooth thighs under her folded skirt and her white indoor shoes are really distracting.

She stopped in the center of the classroom, and waved towards me with a smile.

“Come in!”

As though I were being sucked in, her action caused me to let go of the door handle and walk towards her.

“So it’s you……”

“Yes, surprised?”

Asakura smiled happily, the right side of her face is red from the sunset shining in.

“You looking for me?”

I intentionally asked in a rough tone, Asakura giggled and replied,

“Indeed I was looking for you, I have something to ask you.”

Asakura’s white face now turns towards me.

“Have you heard of the saying ‘It is better to do it and regret than not do it at all’? You think that makes sense?”

“I’m not really sure who said that, but I guess the meaning makes sense.”

“If there exists a situation where staying in the status quo would make things worse, and you have no idea how to improve it, what would you do?”

“Improve on what? The economy?”

Ignoring my question, Asakura smiled and continued,

“Wouldn’t you have said that you should do it first and face the consequences later? Since nothing is going to change if things continue like this.”

“Hmm, I guess so.”

“That’s what I meant.”

Asakura, who had her hands behind her back, leaned slightly forward.

“However, since those above are incapable of thinking laterally, they are out of touch with the rapid changes in this reality, I’m compelled to do something in order to make things run smoothly. That’s why, being in this reality, I have decided to act on my own and forcefully make some changes.”

What on Earth are you trying to say? Is this some sort of prank? I looked around the room, wondering whether Taniguchi is hiding in the cabinet holding the sweeping tools behind, or whether he’s sitting under the teacher’s desk.

“I’ve grown tired of having to observe a changeless environment, that’s why……”

I was so busy looking around that I didn’t really hear what Asakura was saying.

“I have to kill you, and see what sort of reaction Suzumiya Haruhi would have.”

In an instant, Asakura flashed her right hand, a white metallic flash went past where my neck used to be.

Smiling pleasantly, Asakura’s right hand now revealed a knife as sharp as an army knife.

I was very lucky to dodge the first strike. Because right now I’m on the ground on my backside, looking palely at Asakura. *If I’m trapped, I won’t be able to escape!* This thought flashed through my mind, and I crawled backwards like a locust.

Why didn’t Asakura give chase?

……No, wait! What on Earth's going on? Why is Asakura trying to stab me with a knife? Wait a second, what did Asakura just say? She wants to kill me? Kill me? But, why!?

"Stop joking around!"

I could only say this trademark sentence of mine.

"That was really dangerous! Even if that were a fake knife, I would be scared as well! Put that thing away!"

I was really confounded. If someone knows what's going on, please come out and explain to me!

"You think I'm joking?" Asakura said in a very cheerful tone, not sounding very serious at all. Now that I think about it, a high school girl smiling while threatening your life with a knife is really scary. So now you know how frightened I was.

"Hmph!"

Asakura patted her shoulder with the back of the knife blade.

"You don't like dying? You don't want to die? The death of organic entities means nothing to me."

I slowly stand up. *This has to be a joke, I'm only scared because I'm too serious.* I kept on telling myself this, because it was just too surreal. Asakura is the serious responsible class monitor, who would only talk when necessary in class, and wouldn't go nuts even when faced with a problem. Why would she carry a knife and say she wants to kill me all of a sudden?

Yet that knife is real, if I wasn't careful I would be bleeding all over the place.

"I don't get what you're saying. This isn't funny anymore, OK? Put that scary thing away!"

"I can't do that," Asakura smiled her usual innocent smile, "Because I really want you dead."

She held her knife by her waist, and started rushing towards me. She's fast! This time I was prepared, because long before Asakura made her move, I had set sights on escaping through the door - yet I ended up hitting a wall.

????

That's strange, where'd the door go? Even the windows are gone! There were supposed to be windows on the wall facing the corridor, now it's just a thick grey wall.

Impossible!

"It's useless."

Asakura's voice grew closer from behind.

"I now have control of this area of space, so all exits have been blocked. It's quite easy actually, all I needed to do was tamper with the molecular structure of the buildings on this planet and I can change its matter at will. This room has now become a sealed room, and there's no way in or out now."

I turned around and noticed that the sunset has gone as well. The whole room is surrounded by concrete walls, leaving only the white lamps shining coldy on the desks.

This can't be!

Asakura's silhouette moved slowly towards me.

"I advise you to stop resisting; you're going to die, anyway."

"……Who exactly are you?"

No matter how I looked, there were walls around me. There's not a single door, a single window, nothing! Is something wrong with my brain?

I frantically moved between the desks, trying to get as far from Asakura as possible. Yet Asakura walked towards me in a straight line, moving the desks and chairs from her path at will. Compared to her, my path was always blocked by the desks.

This cat and mouse chase didn't last long, and eventually I was cornered.

If that's the case……

I decided to take a risk and threw a chair at Asakura, yet the chair turned in the air right in front of Asakura, and flew off to the other end of the room. How can this be possible!?

"Didn't I tell you it's useless? Everything in this room now moves according to my will."

Wait… Wait!

What is going on here? If this isn't a joke or a prank, and neither me nor Asakura were crazy, then what is going on?

I have to kill you, and see what sort of reaction Suzumiya Haruhi would have.

Why is it Haruhi again? Haruhi, my, aren't you getting a bit too popular?

"I should've done this from the beginning."

My body froze after Asakura said that. You can't do that! That's cheating!

My feet are rooted to the ground like a tree, unable to move. My arms are fixed like a wax statue - I can't even move my fingers. My face, stuck pointing towards the ground, could see Asakura's indoor shoes slowly entering my field of vision.

"Once you die, Suzumiya Haruhi is bound to have some sort of reaction. This might create a massive data explosion from which we could salvage something. This could be the chance in a lifetime for us."

I don't really care about that!

"Now die."

I could feel Asakura lifting her knife up. Where would she start? The throat arteries, heart? If I knew how I was going to die, I could at least be prepared. At least let me close my eyes…… No, I can't do that. W… what's this!?

I suddenly felt the air shake. The knife began to fall upon me……

At this moment, the ceiling gave out a loud cracking noise, followed by debris falling down. Some of which fell on my head - that hurts! Dammit! I was covered in white dust by the large amount of continuously falling debris, so I guess Asakura is covered in white as well. I wanted to see what she looked like now, but I couldn't move……no, wait! I can move again!

I lifted my head and discovered……!

A shocked Asakura - just as she's about to slice my neck. Standing in front, catching the blade with her bare hands, is the slim figure of Nagato Yuki.

(Wow, she can catch the blade with just her bare hands.)

"Your programs are too basic." Nagato said in her usual expressionless tone,

"The data lockdown around the ceiling area was incomplete. That is why I was able to discover it and enter."

"You want to get in my way?" Asakura sounded calm. "Once I kill this person, Suzumiya Haruhi is bound to have some sort of reaction. Only then can we obtain more data."

"You are supposed to be my backup." Nagato said in a mantra-like tone, "This sort of insubordination is forbidden; you must obey my commands."

"What if I refuse?"

"Then I will disconnect your data interface."

“Would you like to try? I have the advantage here, since this classroom belongs to the scope of my data control.”

“Processing application for data interface disconnection.”

As Nagato finished, the knife in her hand started glowing brightly. Then, like the sugar cube being placed into a cup of tea, it slowly crystallized and dissolved and fell towards the floor like powder.

“!!”

Asakura released the knife and jumped five meters away. Seeing this scene, I couldn’t help but realize - whoa, these two really aren’t human.

Opening up the distance in an instant, Asakura landed elegantly and continued smiling as usual.

The space around began to distort - I can only describe it as such. Asakura, the desks, the ceiling and floor all shook vigorously; overall, it had the appearance of what seemed like liquid metal, though I couldn’t really see that clearly.

Just as I was wondering how it’s just this space that’s slowly being turned into what seemed like spears, a crystallized explosion occurred in front of Nagato’s raised palms.

The next second, there were continuous crystallized explosions around Nagato, followed by powder dropping onto the ground. The crystallized spear-like objects flew from all directions towards us with lightning fast speed. It was already a moment later when I discovered Nagato facing those spears with the same speed.

“Do not move away.”

Nagato dodged Asakura’s attacks while pulling my tie so that I would kneel and hide behind her.

“Whoa!”

An unknown object flew over my head and smashed the blackboard to pieces.

Nagato looked upwards a little, and in an instant many icicles grew from the ceiling and fell on Asakura’s head. Asakura moved away with a speed that couldn’t be seen with the naked eye, and instantly an icicle forest formed from the ground.

“There’s no way you can beat me in this area of space.” Asakura said calmly. She and Nagato stood a few meters apart, facing each other, while I could only kneel on the ground hopelessly, not daring to stand up.

Nagato stood in front of me with her legs slightly opened, and it's only now that I notice she's so serious that she even wrote her own name on her indoor shoes. Then, as if chanting a prayer, Nagato mumbled softly,

```
SELECT serial_code
FROM database
WHERE code='data'
ORDER BY aggressive_combat_data
HAVING terminate_mode
```

"Target name Asakura Ryoko, hostility confirmed. Disconnecting target's organic information interface."

Normal space no longer exists in the classroom. Everything has turned into geometric shapes, appearing twisted or cone-like. Seeing this surreal scenery is like entering one of those theme park house of horrors, I'm getting dizzy already from watching.

"You would stop functioning before I would."

I have no idea where Asakura's voice is coming from in all this colorful mirage.

Whoosh, the sound of the wind slicing through the air.

Nagato kicked me hard with the back of her heel.

"What are you……"

Before I could finish, there was a spear so fast, I could just barely see it as it went past the tip of my nose and fell on the ground.

"We'll see how much longer you can protect him. Try this!"

The next second, Nagato stood in front of me, impaled by about twelve brownish looking long spears.

"……"

In other words, Asakura attacked Nagato and me from all directions at the same time. Nagato managed to crystallize some of the spears and smash them, but trying to prevent me from getting hit by the remaining spears, she'd shielded me with her body. But I didn't know that then, since it all happened so quickly.

Nagato's glasses fell from her face and softly bounced as they hit the ground.

"NAGATO!"

“You should not move.” Nagato said calmly, pointing to the spears stuck on her chest and stomach. A pool of blood began to form under her feet.

“I’m fine.”

God, how can this be fine?

Nagato pulled out the spears from her body without even flinching once. The bloody spears fell onto the ground with an icy sound, and instantly turned into a desk. So that’s what the spears are made from!

“Being this injured, I don’t suppose you can stop me now. Here’s the finishing blow!”

At the other end of the twisted space, Asakura’s silhouette faded in and out. I could see a smile from her face, she then slowly raised her hands - if I’m not mistaken, her arms glowed all the way from her fingertips, and then extended to twice as long. No, not just twice as long…

“Please die!”

Asakura’s arms kept on extending, wriggling like a bunch of tentacles, and then closing in from both directions. Unable to move, Nagato’s small figure shook violently…… The next instant, my face was splattered with blood.

Asakura’s left arm clawed into Nagato’s right abdomen, while her right arm clawed into Nagato’s left breast, piercing through her back and stopping at the classroom wall. Blood spattered from Nagato’s mouth and down along her white legs, making the blood pool below even wider.

“It’s over.” Nagato said softly, then grabbed onto the tentacles. Nothing happened.

“What’s over?” Asakura said, sounding as though she’d won. “You mean your three years of life?”

“No.” said a seriously wounded Nagato, as though nothing had happened to her. “Commencing data interface disconnection.”

Almost instantly, everything in the classroom began glowing brightly, and then crystallized and dissolved within the next second, the desk beside me also turned into sand and collapsed.

“How can this be……”

Crystallized sand fell from the ceiling nonstop, this time it is Asakura’s turn to be stunned.

“You truly are outstanding.”

The spears within Nagato’s body also turned into sand.

“It took me some time to penetrate the program. But, everything will end now.”

“……You’ve already planted destructive factors around long before I penetrated this place, haven’t you? No wonder you looked rather weak. It was because you’ve used attacking data beforehand……” Asakura said despondently as her arms began to crystallize.

“Sigh, it’s such a pity, after all I’m just backup. I thought this would be a chance to break free from this deadlock.”

Asakura reverted back to her normal classmate self and looked at me cheerfully.

“I lost. It’s great that you can survive. But you’d better be careful, the Integrated Data Entity isn’t as united as you think, there are quite a number like me with dissenting opinions. It’s just like humans, there will be extremists like me next time. And who knows, even those who control Nagato-san might change their thinking and turn to kill you instead.”

She’s now covered from chest to toe by the glowing crystallized substance.

“Before that happens, I wish you and Suzumiya-san the best of luck. Farewell.”

Saying that, Asakura silently dissolved into small sandy dunes. And then, the smaller crystallized sand dunes continued to dissolve until they completely vanished.

Under a rain of crystallized sand, the high school girl known as Asakura Ryouko vanished completely from this school.

There was a loud thud, suddenly. I was quick to find Nagato lying on the floor, so I frantically got up.

“Nagato! Hang in there! I’ll call the ambulance!”

“There is no need.”

Nagato glanced at the ceiling with her wide open eyes.

“Physical damage doesn’t mean anything to me. Our priority is to restore this area of space back to its original state.”

The sand crystals around stopped falling.

“Removing impure substances, reconstructing classroom.”

As she finished, the familiar 1-5 classroom reappeared before our eyes. It was like a tape rewinding: everything in the room reverted to the way it had been before.

The blackboard, the teacher's desk, the remaining chairs and desks all grew from the white sand and back to their original form as I had seen before school ended today. I can't describe what was going through my mind then. If I had not seen it with my own eyes, I would've thought all these images were made with state-of-the-art CG special effects.

Windows grew from the walls, with the half-stained glasses intact; the sunset reappeared outside, bathing me and Nagato in an orange-red light. I tried looking inside my desk drawers, all the contents were still there intact, and all the blood that had spattered onto my face had now completely disappeared. This was too amazing. I could only describe it as magic!

"Are you really okay?"

I knelt beside Nagato who remained lying on the floor. I had thought she would have many wounds and holes in her uniform after being impaled by those spears, but they were all gone now.

"As processing power has been converted into data operation, I have just reversed the linking interface for a bit."

"You need me to pick you up?"

Surprisingly, Nagato didn't hesitate and grabbed my hand, just as she was about to stand up -

"Oh!"

She gasped suddenly.

"I forgot to regenerate a new pair of glasses."

"……I actually think you look cuter without glasses. Four-eyed girls are not really my type."

"What does 'Four-eyed girls' mean?"

"It's nothing, just some stupid comment."

"I see."

Now is not the time to say such trivial things. I regret having said that. Even if it meant leaving Nagato behind heartlessly, I should've run out of the classroom at once in embarrassment.

"Yo!"

The classroom door suddenly opened.

"I forgot~ I forgot my stuff~"

Damn, there entering the classroom, humming a stupid song, was Taniguchi.

Taniguchi probably never thought there would still be people in the classroom. When he discovered us, he stood dumbfounded with his mouth wide open like an idiot.

At that moment, I was trying to carry Nagato, but if you had only seen us then, it would have looked like I was slowly laying her down.

“I’m so sorry.” Taniguchi said in a serious tone that I had never heard from him before, and fled the classroom at once. I didn’t even have time to chase him.

“Such an interesting person.” Nagato said.

I sighed heavily.

“What should we do now?”

“Leave it to me.” Nagato said while resting on my chest.

“Data manipulation is my specialty, I’ll let everyone think that Asakura Ryouko has been transferred away.”

So that’s how she does it!

Now is not the time to think about such trivial matters when I’ve just experienced an incredible event. This is no longer an issue of whether or not I should believe what Nagato said to me the other day, I didn’t dare admit I was half-convinced. Yet what happened just now has led me to realize how serious things really were. I really thought I was going to die! If Nagato hadn’t appeared from the ceiling, I would have been killed by Asakura. The experiences of seeing the classroom distorting, of Asakura’s arms extending unnaturally, and Nagato eliminating her emotionlessly have all been etched into my mind.

Is Nagato trying to use this to tell me she really is an alien?

In a way, doesn’t that make me an insider to this mysterious event? Just as I said in the beginning, I had wanted to be a bystander that got sucked into these events, content with being a mere sidekick. But as things stood, I was already the protagonist! That’s right, I had really wished I was a character in a story involving aliens, but when I’d really become one, it put everything into perspective.

To be honest, I’m quite troubled by it.

What I really want is to be the sort of side character that cheerfully provides helpful advice at the right moment when everyone is facing a difficult situation. I don’t want to have my life targeted by my own classmates! I do have my principles when it comes to my life.

My mind wandered aimlessly for some time as I sat in the orange-red classroom. I'd completely forgotten that Nagato was still resting on my chest.

W……what's all this? What was I thinking? Thanks to my spacing out all this time, I didn't notice that Nagato had completed her regeneration and has been staring at me expressionlessly for some time already.

The following day, Asakura Ryouko disappeared from class.

This outcome was inevitable, but I was the only one who thought like that.

"Hmm, I guess it has something to do with Asakura-kun's father's work, that's why she had to transfer all of a sudden. To be frank, the teachers were shocked as well when they heard the news this morning. Because they had to leave the country, they already flew off yesterday."

When Okabe-sensei announced this cover story, most of the girls exclaimed in shock, "What?", "Why?", while the guys also talked amongst themselves about this. Even the teacher had a look of bewilderment. Not surprisingly, the girl behind me could not be silent about this.

Smack! She smacked the back of my head with her fist.

"Kyon, this HAS to be a mysterious event!" Haruhi's eyes shone brightly as she regained her usual vigor.

What should I do? Tell her the truth?

Actually, Asakura-san was created by an unknown entity known as the Integrated Data Sentient Entity, Nagato-san is also her companion, but for some reason their relationship broke down, and in the end Asakura-san had to resort to killing me. As to why it involves me, the reason is actually you. However, Asakura-san got turned into a pile of sand by Nagato-san and disappeared.

Oh please! I'd be ridiculed like hell if I said that, and I don't feel like saying it. I'll just pretend that everything that happened yesterday was just an illusion and leave it as that.

"First a mysterious transfer student coming in, then a girl transferring out mysteriously. There has to be something fishy going on!"

Should I commend her on her brilliant instincts?

"Maybe her dad got a transfer?"

"I'm not buying such a lame excuse."

“Believe it or not, that’s the number one reason for having to transfer schools.”

“But don’t you find it strange? It took them only one day from receiving the job transfer notice to moving out. Just what sort of work is her dad doing?”

“Maybe Asakura’s dad didn’t tell her beforehand……”

“That’s impossible. This requires further investigation.”

I had wanted to say the job transfer was just an excuse, they had escaped overnight from their debtors after leaving behind a mountain of debt, but I decided not to. Since the person who knew the real reason was me.

“As a member of the SOS Brigade, I can’t leave such a mysterious event lying around unnoticed.”

Please stop!

After what happened yesterday, I had a complete changeover overnight. After all, having witnessed all this supernatural stuff firsthand, and trying to tell myself that it never happened, I had to pick one of the following choices: I was either hallucinating; or something was wrong with my brain; or the world is strange enough already; or I’d had a very long dream.

Besides, I could never admit that the world itself is a virtual reality.

Man! For someone who’s just turned 15, having to face a turning point in his life is just a bit too early!

Why does a first year high schooler like me have to deal with such philosophical questions like whether the world exists or not? Those aren’t things I should be thinking about. Please, don’t add to my troubles anymore.

Right now I have a whole lot of tricky issues to deal with!

Chapter 6

As with yesterday, today I found yet another letter inside my shoe locker. What's with people delivering letters through shoe lockers these days?

It had a different feeling this time, however. The letter wasn't folded and anonymous like last time. On the back of the envelope, which looked like one of those elegant envelopes that come with the shoujo-manga magazines for questionnaires and the sort, was clearly written a name. If my eyes didn't deceive me, I was sure whose name was written on it.

Asahina Mikuru.

I instantly placed the envelope into the pocket of my jacket, and rushed to the men's room to open it. There, on a piece of paper with smiley symbols all over it, were written the following words.

I will be waiting for you in the club room during lunch break.
Mikuru-chan

After the events yesterday, my whole view on life, the world and reality itself went through a 360 degree somersault like an acrobat.

I never want to go through such life-threatening situations again.

Yet I couldn't turn this down. After all, it's Asahina-san who'd invited me this time! Though I had no evidence to prove that this letter had been written by Asahina-san, I never doubted its authenticity, because she seemed like the sort to go through such indirect means. Furthermore, the image of her clutching her pen while writing excitedly on a cute piece of paper really suits her. If it's during lunch, Nagato should be in the club room as well, should anything really happen, I guess she'd come rescue me.

Please don't call me a hopeless coward. I'm just a normal high school student, after all.

After the fourth session, I was surrounded by: Taniguchi, staring at me with meaningful eyes; Kunikida, coming over with his lunchbox, trying to invite me to have lunch together; and Haruhi, asking that I go with her to the staff room to investigate the truth of Asakura's departure. Without even having eaten from my lunchbox, I left at once for the club room.

It was only May, yet the sun was already shining with the brightness of summer. The sun is like an extra large fireplace, happily radiating its energy towards the Earth. When summer finally comes, Japan becomes a natural sauna. I could feel the sweat creeping into my underwear just from walking a few steps.

In three minutes, I arrived at the club room door. I knocked first.

“Please come in.”

It was Asahina-san’s voice, there was no doubt about it. Alright, I could relax and go in!

When I entered, I found Nagato missing, and to my surprise, so was Asahina-san.

In front of me stood a long-haired girl leaning by the window ledge facing the school courtyard. She wore a white blouse and a black mini-skirt, while her feet sported a pair of slippers made for school visitors.

When she saw me, she walked towards me delightedly and took my hands.

“Kyon-kun……it’s been a while.”

She was not Asahina-san, yet she resembled Asahina-san a lot, so much that one would easily mistake her for Asahina-san herself. To be honest, even I would have thought she was Asahina-san.

Yet she wasn’t Asahina-san. The Asahina-san I knew wasn’t that tall, and her face wasn’t that fully grown, not to mention the breasts under her blouse couldn’t have possibly grown a third in size overnight.

No matter how I looked, I was sure the person in front of me, smiling while holding my hands, is in her twenties, giving off a completely different feeling from the junior high schoolgirl-like Asahina-san. But why did she resemble Asahina-san so much?

“Excuse me……”

I suddenly thought of a reason.

“Are you Asahina-san’s……sister?”

She looked surprised for a while, then smiled and blinked her eyes, shaking her shoulders. Even her smile was the same.

“Hee hee, I’m me!” She said.

“I am Asahina Mikuru. Only that, I come from an even further timeline……I’ve always wanted to meet you.”

I must’ve looked very stupid then. Indeed, I could easily accept Asahina-san saying she was from the future. Looking at the beauty standing ahead of me, I realized how beautiful she’d grown. Plus she’s taller, making her sexier. I never thought she would be so beautiful.

“Oh, you still don’t believe me?”

Asahina-san in a secretary-like outfit said naughtily,

“Then I’ll show you proof!”

She then promptly began to unbutton her blouse. When she opened the second button, she revealed her bust to my astonishment.

“Look, can you see the star-shaped birthmark? It’s not stuck on! You want to touch it?”

There was a star-shaped birthmark on her left breast, an attractive highlight on the white skin, radiating charm.

“So now you believe?”

How should I say this? I don’t even remember ever seeing whether Asahina-san had a birthmark on her breast. Though I was kinda forced into seeing her change when she dressed as a bunny girl a while ago, I wouldn’t be so focused as to notice such a small area. While I was thinking the above, the attractive, mature-looking Asahina-san said,

“That’s strange. If you hadn’t told me that I had this birthmark, I wouldn’t have noticed it myself.”

Asahina-san confusedly shook her head, and then, as if realizing something, her eyes widened and she blushed furiously.

“Eh……Oh no, I just……T…that’s right! We still haven’t……What should I do?”

Asahina-san put her hands over her face and shook frantically, her collar buttons still opened.

“I got it wrong……I…I’m sorry! Please forget what I just said!”

That’s easier said than done. Oh and, could you please button up? I really don’t know where my eyes ought to be aimed anymore!

“Alright, I’ll believe you for now. Right now I can believe anything.”

“Excuse me?”

“Oh nothing, just talking to myself.”

The unknown-aged Asahina-san was still holding her red face in her hands when she realized what I was staring at, and quickly buttoned up. After sitting properly, she coughed dryly and said,

“Do you really believe that I’ve come from the future to this temporal plane?”

“Of course. Hmm, if that’s the case, that means right now there are two Asahina-sans in this world?”

“Yes, the me from the past……right now, she’s sitting with her classmates having lunch in the classroom.”

“Does that Asahina-san know you’re here?”

“No, after all, she is my past.”

I see.

“Since I wanted to tell you something, I begged the higher-ups to let me come to this timeframe. Oh yes, I’ve previously asked Nagato-san to leave us for now.”

If it’s Nagato, I guess she wouldn’t even flinch when seeing this Asahina-san.

“……Do you know who Nagato-san really is?”

“I’m sorry, but that’s classified information. Oh, I realized I haven’t said that for a long time now.”

“I just heard you say that only a few days ago.”

“You’re right.” Asahina-san said while knocking her head and sticking her tongue out. This really does look like what Asahina-san would do.

Yet she began to look serious suddenly.

“I can’t stay here for too long, so I’ll cut to the point.”

Just say whatever you want to say!

“Have you heard of Snow White?”

I looked at the slightly taller Asahina. Her black pupils seemed to be a bit moist.

“Well, yeah……”

“No matter what distressing situations you will face from now on, I hope you will remember this story.”

“You mean the one with the seven dwarves, the wicked witch and the poisoned apple?”

“Yes, the story of Snow White.”

“I experienced something distressing yesterday already.”

“No……it’s more serious than that. I can’t tell you the details, but all I can say is that Suzumiya Haruhi will also be by your side.”

Haruhi? Also by my side? You mean both she and I will get involved in something troublesome? When? Where?

“……Maybe Suzumiya-san doesn’t think it bothersome……but for you and us all, it is a tricky problem.”

“You can’t tell me the details……can you?”

“I’m sorry, I can only give you hints. That’s all I can do.”

The grown-up Asahina-san was so apologetic that she was near tears. Yes, that’s the expression Asahina-san usually shows.

“You mean the story of Snow White?”

“Yes.”

“I’ll remember it.”

After seeing me nod, Asahina-san said she still had a bit of time left, so she walked around the club room nostalgically, preciously caressing the maid costume hanging on the clothes rack.

“I used to wear this often. Now I definitely wouldn’t dare to wear this.”

“You seem to be cosplaying as an office girl now though.”

“Hee hee, since I can’t enter in my uniform, I have to dress up as a teacher.”

Some people are just born to have costumes worn on them.

“Speaking of which, what else did Haruhi make you wear?”

“I’m not telling you, it’s too embarrassing. Besides, you’ll find out soon enough, isn’t that right?”

Asahina-san walked with her slippers and came towards my face. I discovered her eyes were unusually moist, and her face a little red.

“Then I’ll be going now!”

Asahina-san looked at me, wanting to continue but decided to stop. Seeing her trembling and seemingly wanting something, perhaps I should give her a kiss. Just when I was about to embrace her, she backed off.

Asahina-san turned around lightly and said,

“Finally, I have one more request. Please don’t get too close to me.”

She said with a weak sigh.

I quickly shouted to Asahina-san, who was running to the door, “I have a question for you!”

Asahina-san stopped just as she was about to open the door.

“Asahina-san, just how old are you?”

Asahina-san turned and shook her hair out, then gave a seductive smile, “Classified information~.”

The door closed just like that. I couldn’t have done anything even if I had given chase.

Wow, I could hardly believe that Asahina-san would look so hot when she grew up. Then I suddenly thought of the first thing she said. “Kyon-kun……it’s been a while.” It can only mean one thing: Asahina-san hadn’t seen me for a long time.

“Yes, that should make sense.”

The future Asahina-san must have probably returned to her not-so-distant future, and then spent a few years there, before reuniting with me in this age again.

How long has it been for her? From how she has grown, I’d say perhaps five years……or even three! Girls change a lot when they graduate from high school. My cousin was like that. When she was in high school, she had always been a quiet, bright schoolgirl that didn’t attract any attention. Then when she entered university, she metamorphosed from an ugly caterpillar into a beautiful butterfly. Yet since she’s grown, I’m even more confused by Asahina-san’s true age; I don’t think she’s 17 at all!

Man, I’m hungry, I think I’ll go back.

“……”

Just then, Nagato Yuki entered with her usual well-preserved cold face, but as she wasn’t wearing glasses today, her naked glare landed on me.

“Hey, did you just see someone who looked like Asahina-san passing by?” I half-jokingly said.

“I have seen Asahina Mikuru’s differential temporal clone this morning already.”

Nagato silently sat on her seat and then placed her book on the desk and opened it.

“She is no longer here now and has departed from this timeframe.”

“Can you travel through time as well? With that Data Entity thingy?”

“I cannot. However, temporal movement is not as difficult as one would think; it’s just that humans have yet to grasp its basic principles. Time is like space; moving through it is very simple.”

“Then can you teach me?”

“That is a concept that cannot be conveyed in speech, so you wouldn’t understand even if I explained it.”

“Is that so?”

“Yes.”

“I guess that’s too bad.”

“Too bad.”

It was pointless trying to talk to such a wooden character, so I decided to go back to the classroom. Maybe I still have time for lunch?

“Nagato-san, thanks for yesterday.”

Her wooden expression moved slightly.

“There is no need to thank me. Asakura Ryouko’s actions were my responsibility; I was careless with my supervision.”

Her hair parting swung softly.

Was she trying to bow and apologize to me?

“You definitely look cuter without your glasses.”

She didn’t reply.

I had wanted to rush back to the classroom to have my lunch, but Haruhi was there waiting for me at the door, and my plans for having lunch went out of the window at once. Could this be fate? It seems I've reached the point where I can see through all karma.

Waiting impatiently by the corridor, Haruhi yelled in an annoyed tone,

"Where did you run off to? I thought you'd be back sooner, I haven't even eaten because I was waiting for you so long!"

She doesn't sound mad at all, rather she sounds like those childhood girlfriends who pout trying to hide their embarrassment.

"Don't stand there like an idiot! Follow me!"

Haruhi placed a wrestling wristlock over my hand and dragged me to the dark staircase.

I'm really hungry, man!

"I've just asked Okabe in the staff room. The teachers only learned about Asakura transferring this morning. Early in the morning, someone claiming to be Asakura's dad called, saying they had to move due to some emergency. And you know where they're moving? Canada! How can this be possible? It's just too fishy!"

"Oh really?"

"After that, I said I was a good friend of Asakura and wanted to ask the teachers if I could contact her in Canada."

Please, you hardly ever talked to her when she was still around.

"And you know what the teachers said? They say they didn't know. Normally if someone were to move, wouldn't they usually leave their contact details? Something is funny here."

"No, there isn't!"

"So I asked for Asakura Ryouko's old address from before she moved. I'm gonna go there and have a look after school. Maybe we can find something there."

This girl never listens to what other people are saying, as usual.

Forget it, I'm not going to stop her. In the end, the one wasting her time would be Haruhi, not me.

"You're coming as well."

"Why!?"

Haruhi puffed up her shoulders, and then like a dragon huffing and puffing before firing its breath, she shouted in at a volume the whole school could hear,

“BECAUSE YOU’RE A MEMBER OF THE SOS BRIGADE!!!”

Complying with Haruhi’s orders, I retreated frantically. I went to the club room to tell Nagato about it since neither me nor Haruhi would be having any club activities today, and I had Nagato relay the message to Asahina-san and Koizumi as well when they arrived. Yet I didn’t know whether this silent alien would make things even more complicated, so just to be safe, I took a felt-tip pen and wrote on the back of one of the SOS Brigade flyers,

“There’re no activities today for the SOS Brigade. - Haruhi”

and pasted the note on the door.

Leaving Koizumi aside, at least Asahina can save having to change into her maid costume.

Thanks to all this, the school bell for the fifth session chimed before I could eat anything. So it wasn’t till after the next recess before I could eat.

I’d be lying if I said I’ve never wanted to walk shoulder to shoulder with a girl after school just like in those idol dramas. But even though this dream has now become a reality, I’m far from happy. Just what is going on?

“Did you just say something?”

Haruhi asked while walking by my left side, striding with large steps while carrying a piece of notepaper. I automatically interpreted her question as “You got a problem?”

“Nope, nothing at all.”

We walked down the hill and followed the railway line. A little bit further on would be Koyouen Station.

I had thought we were getting near Nagato’s home, yet I never thought Haruhi was also walking towards that place as well. We then arrived before a familiar, brand-new apartment block.

“Asakura seems to live in Room 505.”

“No wonder.”

“What do you mean ‘no wonder’?”

“No, nothing. Oh yeah, how do you expect to go in? Look, even the gate is locked.”

I pointed to the number keypad by the intercom and said,

“You need to enter the correct code to open the door. Do you know it?”

“Nope, we’re gonna need to endure a prolonged battle in this situation.”

What’re you trying to wait for anyway? Just after I thought how long that’s going to take, we didn’t wait long. As at this moment a middle-aged lady opened the gate from inside, seemingly about to go out to buy some grocery. She looked at us for a while with a questioning glance and then walked off. Haruhi rushed to keep the gate open just before it was about to shut.

This doesn’t seem wise at all.

“Hurry along!”

So I was dragged like that into the entrance hall, and then entered the elevator, which happened to stop at the ground floor. It is basic etiquette to silently look at the floor numbers when riding an elevator……

“That Asakura……”

But Haruhi doesn’t seem to recognize the existence of etiquette.

“……There’re many other fishy things about her. She didn’t seem to have attended the local junior high as well.”

Well, of course.

“I did some research and found she transferred to North High from another town. This is too suspicious! North High isn’t some famous school or anything, just a normal local high school. Why would she go through so much effort just to come from another town to attend this school?”

“Dunno.”

“Yet she lives near the school, and it’s one of those apartments paid by cash and not by rent. The price must be insanely expensive. Has she been commuting by train all the way to her junior high out of town all this time?”

“I told you I don’t know.”

“Looks like there is a need to find out when Asakura started living here.”

The elevator stopped at the fifth floor. We silently stood and looked at the door for Room 505. The name board by the door had been removed, indicating this was an empty apartment. Haruhi turned the door knob, but as expected, it's locked.

Haruhi crossed her arms, wondering how to get inside the apartment to investigate, while I stood by trying hard not to yawn. This is a complete waste of my time.

"Let's find the concierge!"

"I don't think he'll lend us the key."

"No, I'm thinking of asking him when Asakura started living here."

"Forget it, let's go home! What can we do even if we did know?"

"No."

We took the elevator and returned to the ground floor, and went to the concierge's post at the entrance hall. There didn't seem to be anyone behind the glass panel, yet when we pushed the buzzer by the panel, a little old man with white hair slowly appeared.

Haruhi began to bombard the old man with questions before he could even speak.

"Excuse me, we're friends of Asakura-san. She suddenly said she was moving without even leaving her new address, and we don't know how to contact her. Could we please ask if you know where she moved to? And, could we please know when Asakura-san started living here?"

As I was being amazed at how Haruhi can actually use such normal, polite language, the old man seemed to be hard of hearing as he kept replying with, "What?", "Come again?", and so on. Despite that, Haruhi still managed to learn from the old man that he too was surprised at Asakura suddenly moving out. (*I didn't even see the movers come, yet all the furniture inside was gone. It still gives me the creeps.*) And that Asakura moved in three years ago. (*I remember the pretty lil' lady giving me a box of treats that day!*) Also, instead of paying by installments, the apartment seems to have been paid for in one single down payment with cash. (*I guess they must be very rich!*) Wow! You can be a detective at this rate!

The old man seemed pleased to be able to talk to a young girl like Haruhi.

"Come to think of it, although I've often seen that pretty young lady, I don't recall ever seeing her parents."

"I remember the lil' lady's called Ryouko. Such an elegant name for a girl."

"I was hoping she would at least say goodbye……it's such a pity. Oh yeah, you're pretty cute as well!"

When the old man began to talk about similar stuff, Haruhi determined she could no longer extract any more data from him, so she decided to bow to him politely and said, “Thank you very much for your help.”

She then urged me to leave. This didn’t need any urging at all, since I was already prepared to follow her and leave this apartment block.

“Hey, kiddo, that missy is gonna grow into a pretty lady, make sure you don’t let her out of your grasp!”

The old man was obviously talking nonsense. What I was worried about was what sort of terrible reaction Haruhi, who had overheard all that, would have. Yet she silently continued moving forward, and I remained silent as well. A few steps from the entrance hall, we bumped into Nagato, carrying her bag and some convenience store plastic bags. For Nagato, who would often be in the club room reading her book until the school closed, to be here, means she had also left school after I had.

“Ah! Could it be that you live here as well? Such a coincidence!”

Nagato nodded with her pale white face. Please, how can this be a coincidence?

“Have you heard anything about Asakura?”

She shook her head.

“I see. If you hear anything about Asakura, remember to tell me.”

She nodded her head.

I noticed some food cans and vegetables inside her convenience store bags and thought, so she can eat after all!

“What happened to your glasses?”

Nagato didn’t directly answer the question but only silently looked at me. I panicked a bit being stared at by her like that, while Haruhi, not expecting her to answer at all, simply shrugged her shoulders and walked off without turning her head. I lifted my arm and waved goodbye to Nagato.

As we walked past, Nagato whispered, “Be careful.”

Be careful of what this time? As I was about to turn and ask her, Nagato had already entered the apartment block.

I followed Haruhi, who was walking aimlessly along the railway line, remaining two to three steps behind her. We would be getting farther from home if we continued this way, so I asked where we were going.

“Nowhere in particular.” She replied.

I looked at the back of Haruhi’s head and said, “Then can I go home now?”

At this point, Haruhi stopped walking, looking as though she was about to fall forward. Then she looked at me with a face as pale white as Nagato’s.

“Do you ever get the feeling you’re just a small nail on this Earth?”

She continued, “I have, and I’ll never forget it.”

Haruhi stood by the railway tracks, sorry, the railway path, and began to talk.

“When I was in sixth grade, I went with my family to see a baseball game. I wasn’t really interested in baseball, yet when I went there, I was given a shock, since everywhere I looked there were people all around. The people at the opposite of the stadium were as small as a grain of rice, in constant motion. I had thought the whole nation had gathered upon this spot then. So I asked my dad how many people were at the stadium. My dad said as it was full that day, maybe around fifty thousand?

“After the game, the roads were packed with people. Seeing all this, I was stunned. There were so many people here, yet they were only a tiny fraction of the whole nation. I read in geography class that Japan had a population of a hundred million, so I went home and did some math using a calculator, and I found out that fifty thousand was only one out of two thousand of the total population. At that time, I was stunned again. I was only a small part of so many people in the stadium, and this many people were merely one out of two thousand of the whole nation.

“Before that, I had always felt myself to be special. I was happy with my family, and I felt I was with the world’s most interesting people in my class. Yet from that time on, I realized things weren’t like that. The experiences I had in school that I thought were the happiest things in the world, turned out to exist in every school. For the whole nation, this was nothing special. When I discovered that, the whole world around me lost its color. I brush my teeth and go to sleep, then wake up and have breakfast. You see these things everywhere.

“I found it extremely boring when I realized all these things are all part of a person’s ordinary life. I believe that since there’s so many people in this world, there has to be someone who’s living an extraordinary, exciting life. But why isn’t that person me?

“Before I graduated from elementary school, I thought all about it. So when I entered junior high, I decided to change myself. I wanted to let the world know, I’m not a girl who will only sit and wait. I believe I’ve tried my best, but everything’s the same as it’s always been. And now I’m in high school, still hoping for something to change.”

Haruhi said this without pause, as though giving a speech in a debate. When she finished she gave an expression of regretting ever saying all that, and looked at the sky in anguish. A train passed rapidly by us. Thanks to all the rumbling noise, I had time to consider if I should continue asking or whether I should find something philosophical to please Haruhi.

I watched the train leave behind its Doppler Effect sound and said, “Is that so?”

I felt bad at only coming up with such a simple reply.

Haruhi used her hands to hold down her hair, which was blown up by the draft from the passing train, and said, “Let’s go!”

After that, she went towards whence we came from. Though I could reach home faster if I followed where Haruhi was headed, it was as though her back was silently telling me “Don’t follow me!”, so I stayed where I was and watched Haruhi walk off until she disappeared from my sight.

Just what the hell have I been doing all along?

When I came home, I found Koizumi waiting by the door.

“Hi.”

His smile looked a bit fake, as though he was trying to greet an old friend. He waved heartily at me, wearing his uniform and carrying his bag, apparently having just come home from school.

“I want to keep the promise I made to you earlier. That’s why I’ve been waiting for you. I never thought you’d return so quickly!”

Koizumi continued with his ever-present smile,

“Can I delay you for a moment? I’d like to take you to see a place.”

“Something to do with Suzumiya?”

“It’s something to do with Suzumiya-san.”

I opened the door and placed my bag by the entrance room. Then after telling my sister, who had just come out, that I was going to be a bit late tonight, I went back to Koizumi.

A few minutes later, we went on a ride.

Koizumi flagged down a taxi that stopped by my place, then we rode off along the main road eastwards. Koizumi told the driver to go to a large city outside the prefecture. It would be cheaper to go by train, but since Koizumi was paying, I didn't really mind.

"Right, what was the promise you said you were going to keep?"

"Didn't you say you wanted to see proof of my esper powers? Now's the chance, that's why I wanted you to come!"

"Is there any need to travel so far?"

"Yes. I can only use my powers under specific places and conditions. The place we're headed to fits those conditions."

"You still believe Haruhi is God?"

Koizumi, sitting together with me at the rear, glanced at me sideways.

11 The Anthropic Principle is an umbrella term for various attempts to explain the structure of the universe necessary to the existence of life. The most common form is a tautology beginning with the observation that the universe appears surprisingly hospitable to life and concludes in only such a fine-tuned universe can such living observers exist.
In other words: You shouldn't be surprised that the world is suitable for life because, if it wasn't, you wouldn't exist to observe it.

"Have you ever heard of the Anthropic Principle[11]?"

"Never heard of it."

Koizumi sighed and smiled again,

"Basically, it's the theory that 'if something must be true for us, as humans, to exist, then it is true simply because we exist.'"

I don't get it.

"The universe exists simply because it is there for us to observe. In other words, the intelligent lifeforms known as humans learned of the existence of the universe through observing how the universe was formed by the discovery of the laws of physics. If humans had not evolved to the present level, then observation would be impossible, and they would never learn of the existence of the universe.

"This means whether the universe exists or not, for a human who hasn't completely evolved, it wouldn't make much of a difference. It is because of the presence of us fully-evolved humans that the existence of the universe is widely accepted. This is the method of thinking from the humans' point of view."

“Such a queer way of thinking! I mean, the universe exists regardless of whether humans exist or not.”

“You’re right. That’s why the Anthropic Principle is not completely scientific, just a philosophical way of thinking. However, something interesting comes out from this theory.”

The taxi stopped at a red light. The driver was looking forwards only, and never bothered to turn around at us.

“Why did the universe come to be in a state suitable for human habitation? A minor change in the gravitational constant would mean a completely different universe from the one we’re in. Other sets of rules such as Planck’s Constant or the mass ratio of atomic molecules seem to be designed specifically so that humans can live in this universe. Don’t you find this incredible?”

I felt my back itch. This is because the stuff Koizumi said sounds like one of the rhetorical flyers given out by those newly formed religions whose founding principles are based on scientific theories.

“Relax! I don’t believe in the existence of an Almighty God, or the Ultimate Creator that created humans. Many of my companions think the same way as well. Yet, there’s one thing that bothers us.”

Bothered by what?

“The things that we do. Are they as foolish as a clown doing a handstand by the edge of a cliff?”

The expression on my face right now was probably very strange, or Koizumi wouldn’t have laughed so hard like a hen clucking away.

“I was kidding!”

“I really don’t know what the hell you’re talking about.”

I really wanted to tell him, *I don’t have time to play some stupid jokes with you. Can you let me off? Driver, do you mind turning around? If possible, I’d prefer the latter choice.*

“I’m just using the Anthropic Principle as a comparison. We still haven’t touched on the subject of Suzumiya-san.”

This is too strange! Why are you, Nagato and Asahina all so infatuated with Haruhi?

“I believe she is a very charismatic person. Let’s leave that aside now, do you still remember me saying that this world had probably been created by Suzumiya-san?”

I didn’t like what he was saying, but I did remember it having been said.

“She has the ability to realize dreams.”

Can you not be so conclusive?

“I cannot not think like that, because right now the world is headed towards Suzumiya-san’s wishes.”

How is that possible?

“Suzumiya-san always believed aliens existed, that’s why Nagato Yuki appeared. Similarly, she wanted to meet time travelers, so Asahina Mikuru appeared as well. And I appeared before her for the same reasons as well.”

“And how do you know that?”

“It was three years ago……”

Three years ago again! I’m sick of hearing that already!

“One day, I suddenly realized I possessed a specific power, and for some reason, I fully understood how to use this power. At the same time, I also discovered others like me have also had their powers awakened and that these powers were granted by Suzumiya Haruhi. I can’t go into the details, so all I can say is that I know these things while not being able to explain them.”

“Alright, even if I believe you have these powers, I still can’t believe Haruhi can have such powers.”

“Neither did I. A mere schoolgirl having the ability to change the world — sorry, I guess it should be more like the ability to create worlds, huh? The scary thing is that this girl now finds the world she’s in to be boring.”

“Why’s that?”

“Didn’t I say it before? If she could create worlds at will, then naturally she can make this world disappear without a trace and then restructure it according to her wishes. Then, in a literal sense, the world will have come to an end. We can’t determine whether this theory is correct or not; who knows, the world which we believe to be unique has probably been recreated many times before already.”

I was overusing the word “unbelievable” so much now that I needed a thesaurus.

“If that’s the case, why don’t you just tell Haruhi who you really are? Let her know espers really do exist. If she knew, I think she’d be really happy. Maybe then, she wouldn’t want to try and destroy this world!”

“Then it would pose a greater problem. If Suzumiya-san believed the existence of espers to be a very normal thing, then the whole world would become like that. All the laws of physics would be distorted: the Molecular Constant, the Second Law of Thermodynamics, and the rest of the universe would all descend into chaos.”

“There’s something I don’t understand.” I continued, “I remember you saying it was Haruhi’s longing to meet aliens, time travelers and espers that caused you, Nagato-san, and Asahina-san to appear before her?”

“Yes.”

“If that’s true, then why hasn’t Haruhi discovered that yet? In contrast, it’s just you and me who know everything. Isn’t that a little strange?”

“You find it inconsistent? It really isn’t; the real inconsistency is within Suzumiya-san’s heart.”

Can’t you say something that I can understand, please!?

“In other words, she does hope for the existence of aliens, time travelers, and espers. Her common sense, however, is telling her that these things don’t exist, and this creates cognitive dissonance. Though she may be eccentric in her actions and speech, her thinking is still no different from the ordinary person. Her stormy enthusiasm has slowly calmed down in the last few months, and we’re glad to see her stabilize, yet a tornado-like change has occurred suddenly.”

“And why is that?”

“It’s all because of you.”

Koizumi’s raised his lips,

“If you hadn’t given Suzumiya-san some funny ideas, we would still be observing her from behind the scenes right now.”

“What did I do!?”

“It was you who encouraged her to form that weird club. All because of a conversation she had with you, she came up with the idea of forming a club to gather all the mysterious characters. So you must carry full responsibility for all of this. It is because of you that the three groups most concerned with Suzumiya Haruhi have now gathered together.”

“……That’s an unfair accusation!” I defended myself unconvincingly.

Koizumi only smiled and continued, “But that’s not the only reason.”

He stopped talking after saying that. As I was about to say something, the driver said suddenly, “We’re here.”

The car came to a stop and the door opened. I stepped into the crowded street with Koizumi. Though the driver then drove off without even charging any fare, I wasn’t at all surprised.

If people in this area wanted to go shopping, this would be the place for them to do so. This is the typical local metropolis with the railway interchange, as well as all sorts of department stores and complex architecture. The sunset bathed the bustling street full of pedestrians in a glowing color. When the lights at the intersection ahead turned green, the road became occupied by a sea of people in an instant. We were separated for a while by this wave after we got off by the sidewalk.

“What is it that you wanted to show me by taking me here?”

Walking slowly by the zebra crossing, Koizumi looked ahead and said, “There’s still time for you to change your mind!”

“I’m already here anyway, so cut to the chase.”

Walking besides me, Koizumi suddenly grabbed my hand. Hey, what do think you’re doing!? That’s gross!

“Excuse me, but can you please close your eyes for a while? This won’t take long.”

I dodged to avoid a commuter from bumping into me. The green lights started flashing.

Alright! So I obligingly closed my eyes. I could still hear the many footsteps on the street, the car engines roaring, the endless chatting, and all sorts of noises.

Under Koizumi’s guidance, I walked ahead one step, two steps, three steps, and then I stopped.

“You can open them now.”

I slowly opened my eyes.

The whole world fell into a shade of grey.

It was really dark. I couldn’t help but lift my head towards the sky. The glowing orange sun was nowhere to be seen, and the sky was covered by gloomy grey clouds. Were those really clouds? The flawless dark horizon stretched endlessly ahead in every direction. The only thing that stopped this world from falling completely into darkness was the occasional light that shone through, replacing that of the bright sun, producing a weak glow in the grey sky.

There were no people at all.

Besides Koizumi and I, standing in the middle of the intersection, the bustling crowd that was here before had now vanished without a trace. In the vast darkness, only the traffic lights flashed, changing red, while the other set of traffic lights turned green, yet there was not a single vehicle on the road. It was so quiet that one might wonder if the Earth had stopped spinning as well.

"We're now in a gap within a cross-dimensional faultline; this is a Sealed Reality, a place that is completely cut off from the world we live in."

Koizumi's voice became particularly clear in the silence.

"The center of this intersection falls right by the "Wall" of this Sealed Reality. Look, just like that."

Koizumi's outstretched arm stopped in midair, as though blocked by something. I tried to do the same and stretched my arm towards that direction; it felt like touching cold washed vegetables. My hands pushed through the surface of an elastic invisible wall, but I could not extend any further beyond ten centimeters.

"This Sealed Reality has a radius of five kilometers. Usually, it's impossible to enter using normal physical means. One of my powers is the ability to enter such spaces."

Like bamboo poles standing, not a single light shone from the buildings around. The shops within the shopping district were all dark inside, with only the street lamps flickering weakly.

"Where is this place?"

No, the question ought to be "What dimension is this?"

"I'll explain as we move along," said Koizumi casually,

"I'm not too sure about the details, but this is a dimension located not far from ours……Let's put it this way, a cross-dimensional faultline just appeared right over there, and we have entered through the gap. At this moment, the outside world is still going on with its everyday life. It's nearly impossible for normal humans to stumble upon this world by accident."

We crossed the street. Koizumi walked in a direction he had already decided.

"Imagine an inverted bowl-like, egg-shaped dimension, and this place is its interior."

We entered a multi-story apartment complex, but not a single person could be seen, not even a speck of dust.

"Sealed Realities occur randomly. Sometimes it appears once every other day, and sometimes it appears once every several months. Yet, one thing's for sure…"

We climbed up the stairs though it was dark inside. If I hadn't been following Koizumi closely, I would've tripped.

"Whenever Suzumiya-san is in a mentally unstable condition, this space will appear."

We arrived at the rooftop of the apartment block.

"Once a Sealed Reality appears, I will be able to sense it; so too can my companions. How do we know that? Frankly, even we don't know how. In any case, we just know when and where a Sealed Reality will appear, and how to penetrate it. I can't describe this feeling in words."

I held the rooftop fence and looked towards the sky; no breeze could be felt.

"You brought me here to see this? There's hardly anyone here!"

"No, the real thing comes after this. It's about to start."

Quit joking around! But Koizumi pretended not to notice my unpleasant expression.

"My abilities are merely to detect Sealed Realities and penetrate them. To be honest, I can even detect Suzumiya-san's state of mind. This world is like a blister created from the tremors of Suzumiya-san's unstable emotional state, and I am the medicine designed to cure the blisters."

"Your comparison sure is hard to understand."

"People often tell me that. Anyway, you're pretty amazing! You don't seem freaked out at all by the sight of all this."

At this moment, images of Asakura vanishing without a trace and a grown-up version of Asahina flashed before my mind: I've had way too many of such experiences already.

Suddenly, Koizumi lifted his head and glanced afar.

"Seems like it's begun. Turn around and look behind you."

I saw it.

Standing between the tall buildings in the distance was a glowing blue giant.

It was taller than a 30-story building by a head's length. Its slim, deep blue shaded figure seemed to contain some sort of material which allowed it to glow from within. Since it was too dark, I could not perceive its outline, and besides the eyes and mouth, which seemed a bit darker, its face didn't seem to have any other features.

What on earth is that?

The giant slowly lifted its arm and then swung it down like an axe.

The building beside it was smashed in half; then as if in slow-motion, the concrete, wires, and debris made a deafening noise falling to the ground.

“We believe this to be the manifestation of Suzumiya-san’s frustration. Every time her inner conflict reaches a certain limit, this giant will appear and destroy everything around it to relieve pressure, but we cannot allow this thing to have its way in our reality, or it’ll cause widespread destruction. That is why this Sealed Reality is created, so that it can wreak its destruction inside. Does that make sense?”

Every time the glowing blue giant waved its arms, the buildings would be sliced in half and collapse. The giant would then continue forwards, stepping on the debris. Surprisingly, I could only hear the sound of the buildings collapsing, but not the footsteps of the giant.

“According to the laws of physics, it should be impossible for a giant like him to be able to stand, due to its weight. Yet he is able to move around freely in a weightless condition. Though destroying a building involves a change in molecular structure, these rules don’t seem to apply to him. Not even an army would be able to stop him.”

“So we just let him have his way?”

“No, and this is why I exist. Please look over there.”

Koizumi pointed towards the giant. I watched where he was pointing and noticed a few glowing red dots that weren’t around before, now flying around the giant. Compared to the large blue giant, the red dots were like sesame seeds. There were five of them in total, but because they were flying so fast, my eyes couldn’t catch up with them. Like satellites, the red dots orbited around the giant as though trying to stop the giant from moving further ahead.

“Those are my companions, who, like me, have obtained their powers from Suzumiya-san, warriors in charge of hunting down these giants.”

The red dots skillfully dodged the giant’s arm attacks while changing their flight path swiftly and attacked the giant’s body. The giant’s body seemed to be made of gas since the red dots simply flew through it.

However, the giant seemed oblivious to the red dots’ attacks and raised its arm again to smash another department store building.

No matter how the red dots attacked, the giant didn’t seem to be stopping. Red laser-like beams now penetrated the giant’s body nonstop, but as I was too far away, I could not figure out the extent of damage it had sustained. One thing was for certain: the red beams didn’t create any holes in the giant’s body.

“Right, I think I should join them now.”

Koizumi’s body started to glow red, and soon, his glowing body was covered in a red glowing sphere. Standing before me was no longer a human, but a large glowing ball.

This is getting ridiculous.

As if making a signal, the glowing sphere started to rise and then flew straight towards the giant at an incredible speed.

Since the red spheres never stopped flying, I couldn’t figure out how many there were in total, but there shouldn’t have been more than ten, including Koizumi. They bravely flew towards the giant’s body, but all they could do was fly through it. The giant was barely, if even, hurt. As I was thinking that way, one of the red spheres suddenly approached the giant’s wrist and circled it.

The next moment, the giant’s hand was sliced off. The masterless hand fell towards the ground and gave out a mosaic glow, started to become transparent, and then disintegrated like snow melting under the sun. I guess the blue smoke coming out of the giant’s severed wrist must have been its blood. The scene ahead was truly the stuff of fantasy.

The red dots seemed to have changed their attacking style of charging towards the giant. They approached the giant like a bunch of fleas surrounding a dog. The red beams sliced through the giant’s face, and its head came falling down; after that, its shoulder fell as well, followed by its upper torso, leaving behind a strange shape. The falling bits began to give out the characteristic mosaic glow, then disintegrated and vanished.

As the giant was standing in a large piece of land without any obstacles around, I was able to see the whole process from beginning to end. When the giant’s upper torso fell off, its remaining body also began to disintegrate, finally dissolving into beads smaller than dust and spreading over the debris.

Once the red dots floating above made sure their work was done, they started flying off in all directions. Most of them disappeared at once; only one flew towards me, finally landing at the rooftop of the apartment complex. The red sphere slowly lost its glow, and finally Koizumi stood before me, waving his hair pretentiously with his usual smile.

“Sorry to keep you waiting.”

He sounded very calm, and he didn’t sound exhausted at all.

“Finally, I’d like to show you something interesting.”

Koizumi pointed towards the sky. I half-suspiciously raised my head, and in the gloomy grey skies, I saw it!

Right above where the giant first appeared was a crack, like that of a hatching bird trying to break through its eggshell. The crack began to spread rapidly like a spider web.

“Following the blue creature’s destruction, the Sealed Reality will also be destroyed. It’s like a magic show!”

As Koizumi finished his explanation, the large cracks now covered the world ahead, like being covered in a metallic net. The net margins started to narrow until they became as small as black curvy lines. Then, at this moment, crack!

Actually, I didn’t really hear any sound. It was just my brain trying to simulate the sound of glass cracking. A light penetrated from a spot in the sky, and then spread out in all directions in a sphere. I felt the light shower downwards. No, that’s not the right wording: it was more like the opening of the retractable roof of the Tokyo Dome stadium, all within a few seconds. The difference is that this roof covered all the buildings under it.

A loud bustling noise started to rumble in my eardrums, and I covered my ears instinctively. But that was because I’d stayed in a world of silence for quite some time and couldn’t adapt quickly. When I listened carefully again, it was the usual bustling noise in the streets.

The world reverted back to its original state.

There were no collapsed buildings, no grey skies, and no glowing red spheres flying through the air. The road was full of vehicles and people. A familiar orange glow could be seen through the gaps between the buildings. The world seemed grateful at the reception of such warmth and left long shadows behind.

The breeze blew softly.

“Now do you understand?”

Koizumi asked me as we boarded the taxi, which seemed to magically stop before us after we left the apartment block. When I looked, I realized it was the same driver as before.

“I don’t get it.” I answered truthfully.

“I’d knew you’d say that.” Koizumi laughed, “Those blue creatures, we call them Avatars, but, as I’ve told you before, they are greatly related to Suzumiya-san’s mental condition. We’re the same, of course. Once a Sealed Reality appears, once the Avatars begin their movement, we’ll be able to use our powers. We can only use those powers within the Sealed Reality; right now, I’m powerless.”

I silently glanced at the driver’s back.

“I don’t know why it’s just us who have such powers, but I think it has nothing to do with our identities. It’s like winning the lottery: even though the chances may be low, there’s bound to be someone winning. I just happened to be the one to be stabbed by the random spear.”

“How unlucky I am!” Koizumi smiled forcefully. I remained silent because I didn’t know what I should have said.

“We cannot allow the Avatars to move freely. Why is that? Because the more these Avatars damage, the larger the sphere of the Sealed Reality will grow. The one you just saw was a smaller one. If we leave them unattended, they will continue to grow until they cover the whole nation, even the whole world, and finally, that alternate grey world will completely replace the world we’re living in.”

I finally open my mouth.

“How come you know so much?”

“I told you, I just know, it can’t be explained. Everyone associated with the ‘Organization’ is the same. One day they just suddenly knew everything about Suzumiya-san and how she could affect this world, as well as realizing that since they now had supernatural powers, they couldn’t just allow these Sealed Realities to continue untouched. When normal people learn of this kind of thing, they would normally want to see if they can be of any help. If we hadn’t done anything about it, the world as we know it would have been destroyed.”

“And that’d be troublesome.” Koizumi fell silent after mumbling these words.

Before I reached home, we just quietly watched the view outside the window.

The car stopped, and as I was stepping out, he spoke again,

“Please pay attention to Suzumiya-san’s actions. Her supposedly stable mental state has now begun to show signs of rapid change. It’s been quite a while since something like today has happened.”

Even if I did observe, she had still become like that, isn’t that so?

“Frankly, I don’t know either. But I find it to be a good idea to leave everything to you, since some of my companions tend to think about things in a much too complex way.”

Before I could reply, Koizumi stuck his head back inside the open door and shut it. As I watched the legendary phantom taxi drive off into the distance, I suddenly felt very stupid, so I started to stride back home.

Chapter 7

A self-proclaimed android created by aliens. A self-proclaimed girl who leapt through time. A self-proclaimed squad of young espers. All three them have shown me proof of their identities, so I may remove the 'self-proclaimed' from their titles. They revolve around Haruhi for three different reasons. Honestly, it's not too bad at all. No, it *is* bad. Because I still can't understand one thing.

Why me?

Koizumi said the reason aliens, time travelers, and espers all gather around Haruhi is because she wished for it.

Then, what about me?

Why am I involved in all of this? I'm just a human being. One hundred percent normal. I don't have any sudden memories of a strange past life, or any unspeakable powers. Just a superbly normal high school student!

Who on earth wrote the script for this story anyway?

Or has someone drugged me and caused me to hallucinate all of this? Or maybe I've been struck by a toxic electric wave? Who the hell got me stuck in all this?

Is it you, Haruhi?

Just kidding.

I don't really know anything.

Why am I so troubled? It seems all the answers rest with Haruhi. She should be the one worrying. Why do I have to be frustrated for her as well? This doesn't make sense! I've decided so! If things are as Nagato, Koizumi and Asahina-san say, then you guys should just tell Haruhi herself! Whatever becomes of the world then, that's her responsibility; I have nothing to do with it.

Just put her on your merry-go-round! Leave me out of this!

As the days counted down to summer, I walked sweatily up the slope, wiping my sweat off with my jacket, while pulling my tie and opening my third shirt button. It was already this hot in the morning, and it would become hellish by noon. As I was gritting my teeth and walking on the

slope to school, someone slapped my shoulder. As I yelled “Don’t touch me! It’s hot!” and turned around, Taniguchi’s face came into view.

“Yo!”

Taniguchi, walking side by side with me now, was also in a sweat. “How annoying, my well-prepared hairdo is ruined by all this sweat.” Though he said that, he still looked so cheerful.

“Say, Taniguchi,” I cut in as Taniguchi went on bragging nonsensically about how his dog was doing, “I’m a normal high schooler, right?”

“What?”

Taniguchi gave a laugh as though he’d heard a very funny joke.

“Maybe you should define what ‘normal’ is. Otherwise this conversation won’t make sense.”

“Really?”

I regretted having asked him that question.

“Just kidding! You, normal? I don’t think a normal high schooler would push down a girl in an empty classroom!”

Of course, Taniguchi wouldn’t forget such things.

“I’m a guy as well, so I know my limits. Your secret is safe with me, you get what I mean?”

I didn’t get it at all.

“When did you and she have such a relationship? Nagato Yuki is what I would grade as an A-!”

So, Nagato is an A- by his grading. I tried to explain to Taniguchi,

“That’s because…”

I suppose Taniguchi’s mind right now is full of unrealistic desires and fantasies. So, I decided to use the following explanation.

Poor Nagato is the victim of Haruhi’s unreasonable occupation of the Literature Club room. She was very troubled at not being able to hold activities for her own club, so she came to me for help. She asked me if there was any way to make Haruhi give up the Literature Club room and go somewhere else. I was moved by her sincerity, so I decided to help the poor girl, and discussed it with her in a place where Haruhi wouldn’t find out about it. As we talked about what to do in the classroom after Haruhi had left, Nagato fainted as a result of her anemia. I managed to catch her before she fell to the floor, and then you came barging in. It’s really nothing!

“Yeah right!”

He even kicked me after saying that. Damn it! It took me a long time to come up with such a perfect cover story! I can’t believe I couldn’t fool him!

“Let’s say I believe that bullshit; I still don’t think you’re normal. You actually managed to have the nearly unsociable Nagato Yuki come to you for help, and that’s really something.”

“Please, is Nagato really that famous?”

“Besides, you’re Suzumiya’s subordinate. If you’re a normal high schooler, then I’m as normal as a flea.”

Then I asked, “Taniguchi, do you have any superpowers?”

“Wha-?”

12 The practice of standing in the street and picking up girls, mostly common with younger people (high school and early college age). Men who do this all the time are called by the same term, and are sometimes considered somewhat weird.

The already foolish look on his face went up a notch. He looked like a nanpa[12], the kind young schoolgirls have to be careful of.

He said, “I see, so even you aren’t immune to Suzumiya’s toxins… Though we don’t spend a lot of time together, you really are a nice person. So please try not to stick too close to me; I don’t want to be infected with Suzumiya’s virus as well.”

I punched Taniguchi softly, causing him to laugh uncontrollably. Ha, if this guy’s an esper, then from today, I’m the Secretary-General of the United Nations.

As I reached the stairs leading to the school entrance, I was sort of grateful to Taniguchi for having a conversation with me, as the heat had cooled down after talking to him.

In such hot weather, even Haruhi could only lie exhausted on her desk, looking sorrowfully at the hills in the distance.

“Kyon, I’m hot!”

Really? So am I.

“Fan me with your book.”

“Instead of fanning someone else, I’d rather fan myself. I don’t have enough energy early in the morning to help you.”

Haruhi remained lying lazily on the desk, without her usual pompous and articulate aura.

“What do you think Mikuru-chan should wear next?”

After bunny girl and maid costumes would be……wait a minute, there’s going to be another costume!?

“Should it be cat ears? Or a nurse? Maybe she should dress up as a queen this time?”

Images of Asahina-san flashed through my mind: of her blushing furiously with her small figure wriggling and being forced to wear all sorts of costumes. I’m beginning to get dizzy. Ah, she’s just too cute.

Haruhi seemed to guess what I was thinking and scowled at me. She then lightly flipped her hair behind her ears.

“You look like an idiot,” Haruhi decided.

Hey, weren’t you the one bringing up the subject? But perhaps she was right, so there’s no point in arguing with her.

While fanning the neck of her uniform with a textbook, she blurts out, “I’m so bored!”

14 So what’s a heno-ji, I hear you ask...? It’s a children’s drawing, full name へのへのもへじ (henohenomoheji) made with those hiragana characters, to form a figure of a human face.

Haruhi’s mouth was perfectly like a heno-ji[14]. She looked like a comic book character.

Even under the intense radiation of the sun’s rays, we managed to survive the hellish afternoon PE session. After class, everyone was cursing “Damn that Okabe! Having us run a marathon for two whole hours!”, while taking off our PE uniforms, which had become pieces of wet cloth, in the Sixth Class room, before returning to the Fifth Class room.

Most of the girls had already changed, but as the last session was homeroom, there were some who belonged to sports clubs who remained dressed in their PE uniforms for their after-school activities. Yet what puzzled me was why Haruhi, who was not associated with any sports club, was also dressed in her PE uniform.

“It’s too hot!”

That’s right, that’s her reason.

“What does it matter? I’m still going to have to change when I get to the club room! Not to mention I’m on duty this week, and I can move better in this.”

Haruhi held her chin with her hand and looked out at the gathering rain clouds outside.

“That’s not a bad idea.”

Having a PE uniform as the next cosplay theme isn’t a bad idea! What? ‘Cosplay’ isn’t the right word? I don’t know what she’s up to, but right now she’s trying her best cosplaying as a high school girl!

“Just what on earth are you thinking about?”

Haruhi’s accurate guess made me wonder if she could read minds.

“Before I arrive at the club room, I forbid you from doing anything funny to Mikuru-chan.”

Does that mean I can do something funny to her after you arrive?

I kept that thought to myself and I raised my arms roughly like a criminal at the point of a sheriff’s gun in a Western movie.

As usual, I knocked first and waited for a reply before entering. Like a doll sitting on a chair, a cute maid greeted me with the brightest of smiles, like a sunflower greeting the sun. Ah, I feel so warm!

15 Camellia (Tsubaki in Japanese) is a genus of flowering plants in the family Theaceae, native to eastern and southern Asia from the Himalaya east to Japan and Indonesia.

Nagato sat by the table reading her book, like a Camellia[15] blossoming in spring. Argh, what kind of comparisons am I making?

“I’ll go and make tea.”

Putting on her headband, Asahina-san went to the side of the rusty table and carefully placed the tea leaves into the teapot.

I sat in the commander’s seat, happily watching Asahina busying herself, when I suddenly thought of something.

I quickly turned on the computer and waited for the hard disk to boot. Once the screen appeared, I opened a file and entered the password “MIKURU”. As expected, the processing speed was unbelievable on the Computer Study Group’s new model. In an instant, Asahina-san’s maid costume images appeared on the screen.

After I made sure Asahina-san was busy brewing tea, I enlarged one of the images again and again.

That image was from the time Asahina-san was being forced into sexy poses by Haruhi. Her seductive cleavage could be seen, and there on her enticing left breast was a little black mark. I highlighted that mark and enlarged it further; the image was a bit fuzzy, but sure enough, there was a star-shaped birthmark.

“So that’s the one.”

“Did you find something?”

Before Asahina-san placed the teacup on the desk, I swiftly closed all the image files. I’m pretty meticulous when it comes to this stuff. Of course, by the time Asahina-san came by my side, she would find nothing on the screen.

“Huh, what’s this? What’s inside this “MIKURU” file?”

Oh no! I was too careless!

“Why does that file have my name? What’s inside it? Let me see, c’mon! Let me see!”

“Er, what’s inside… huh? I wonder? I don’t think there’s anything. Yup, that’s it, there’s nothing inside.”

“Liar!”

Asahina-san cheerfully stuck out her arm and leaned over me as she tried to grab the mouse from my right hand. No way, Jose! I held onto the mouse, refusing to let go. Asahina-san then draped her soft body over me, trying to crawl over my shoulder. I could smell her sweet scent close to my face.

“Asahina-san, can you please let me go…”

“C’mon, just a peek!”

Asahina-san, who was placing her left hand on my shoulder while reaching out for the mouse with her right, was now completely on me; I felt the situation was going from bad to worse.

Her sweet laughter softly trickled into my ear. Unable to resist such temptation, my hand released its grasp, and at this moment…

“What are you two doing?”

We were frozen by an icy, minus-273-degree Celsius voice. Haruhi, wearing her PE uniform and carrying her bag, had a scary expression as though she had just witnessed her dad assaulting an innocent girl.

The next instant, the stunned Asahina-san began to move. She clumsily got off my back, retreated slowly, and then sat slowly on the chair like an ASIMO robot[17] whose batteries were nearly dead. Her pale face was now close to tears.

Haruhi made a "humph", and strode to the desk glancing down at me.

17 Bipedal robot made by Honda. Commercially available in 2000.

"So, you're interested in maid costumes?"

"What are you trying to say?"

"We need to change."

Suit yourself! I'm just going to quietly sip the tea Asahina-san brewed for me.

"Didn't I say we need to change?"

So?

"SO GET OUT!!!"

I was pretty much kicked out and fell on the corridor, with the door behind me banging shut.

"What the hell was that for!?"

I didn't even have time to put down my cup. I wiped the spilled tea off my shirt with my fingers and then leaned on the door.

That's funny. Something's not right.

"Ah, that's right!"

Normally Haruhi would openly change clothes in the classroom, but now she's actually driven me from the room.

It seems she's begun to change. Perhaps she's reached the age where she becomes embarrassed by such stuff? Because the guys in Fifth Class would always rush out of the classroom once the PE session bell rings, no one's really noticed that she's changed. Oh yeah, the person who got the guys into this habit of rushing out before PE, Asakura, is no longer with us.

I sat outside the door for a while. The sound of clothes slithering had stopped, but I still hadn't heard anyone calling me in. And so I sat and waited for ten whole minutes.

"Please come in…"

Asahina-san's small voice came from behind the door. As the impeccable maid opened the door for me, beyond her shoulders I saw Haruhi sitting gloomily at the desk with her white legs on the table. She wore a pair of long bunny ears on her head while wearing that nostalgic bunny girl suit. Maybe she couldn't be bothered because she wasn't wearing her cuffs or necktie. She wasn't even wearing any stockings.

"Though the arms and the back are a bit cool, this costume is actually quite tight."

Having said that, Haruhi picked up her teacup and drank her tea as though she were enjoying it, while Nagato went on reading her book.

Being surrounded by a maid and a bunny girl, I didn't know how to react. If I brought these two girls out to attract customers, I'd definitely make a profit. As I was thinking this…

"Whoa, what's this?"

Koizumi suddenly let out a strange noise as he greeted everyone with his smile.

"Is there a costume party today? Apologies for not wearing one today."

Cut the crap, you don't want to make things any more complicated.

"Mikuru-chan, you sit here."

Haruhi pointed to the chair ahead of her. Asahina-san sat obediently in front, looking terrified of the scary Haruhi. I wondered what Haruhi was going to do, only to see her making a ponytail with Asahina-san's brown curly hair.

At first glance, it seemed like an elder sister tidying her younger sister's hair. But since Asahina-san was petrified while Haruhi's expression was blank, it made what was supposed to be a warm scene very awkward. Apparently Haruhi was only trying to make a ponytail for Asahina-san the maid, and that was all.

I looked at Koizumi, who was smiling the whole time while looking at this scene, and said finally,

"Wanna play Othello?"

"Sure, I haven't played for ages."

As black and white fought for control of the board, (I never thought that Koizumi, who could turn into a glowing sphere, would be so lousy at board games) Haruhi tied a ponytail with Asahina'-sans hair, then loosened it, then tied two ponytails, and a hairbun…

(Each time Haruhi touched Asahina-san, she would tremble all over) while Nagato continued indulging herself in her book.

I'm getting more and more confused as to what this gathering is all about!

That's right, that day we conducted our SOS Brigade activities peacefully. Nothing associated with aliens from a different dimension, time travelers from the future, blue giants, or red glowing spheres happened at that time. No one wanted to do anything special, nor did anyone know what they should have been doing. We just allowed ourselves to ride on the flow of time, living our high school life idly. Everything seemed perfectly normal.

Even though I was dissatisfied with such a normal life, I'd always tell myself, "Why think so much? You've got so much time." And then I would once again look forward to the next day.

Even then, I was quite happy. I came aimlessly to this club room and watched Asahina-san work busily like a real maid, Nagato sit like a Buddha statue, Koizumi with his bright smile, and Haruhi with her mood swings. All these things gave off an aura of complete normality, yet all these had become part of my surprisingly satisfying high school life. Though I've had the out-of-reality experiences of a classmate trying to murder me and seeing fierce monsters appearing in a gray world, I was not certain that they were not figments of my imagination, a result of hypnotism, or even some hallucination.

I was still sort of pissed at Haruhi for dragging me into her club, but from a deeper perspective, it was only because of her that I could hang out peacefully with such interesting people. Putting aside the question of "Why me?", maybe someday there'd be other normal humans like me who wanted to join this club.

Yes, I'd been thinking about this problem for some time now.

Anyone would have thought about this, right?

Yet there's still someone who has never thought about this.

That's right, that someone is Suzumiya Haruhi.

That night, after having dinner and a bath, and finishing my revision of tomorrow's English lesson, I looked at the time and discovered it was time for bed. I lay on my bed and opened the thick hardback book Nagato had stuffed into my arms. I thought a quick read wouldn't hurt, so I

casually read the first few pages. The story was surprisingly interesting, so I continued page after page. You really have to read through one to understand how enjoyable a book can be. Reading's not so bad after all!

Yet it's impossible to finish such a thick book in one night, so I put down the book after reading a very long monologue by one of the protagonists. Sleep overcame me, and after placing the bookmark with Nagato's handwriting into the book, I switched off the lights and crept underneath my blanket. In a few minutes, I was in dreamland.

Do you know why humans have dreams? Sleeping is divided into Rapid Eye Movement (REM) and Non Rapid Eye Movement (NREM), and they go in periodic cycles. NREM occurs for the first few hours after a person falls asleep, with the brain usually in a stasis-like state during this stage. The stage in which the body is unconscious, while the brain becomes slightly active is known as REM, and dreams will occur in this stage. By morning, REM will have increased in frequency, meaning almost everyone will dream until they wake up. I dream every night, but as I usually wake up late every time, I'm in such a hurry to go to school that I usually forget what I've dreamed. Yet sometimes I'll suddenly remember a long forgotten dream I had years ago. It's really amazing how a human's memories are structured.

Alright, enough casual talk. Actually, I don't give a damn.

I felt someone slapping my face. Go away! I'm tired! Don't disturb my dreams!

"……Kyon."

The alarm clock hadn't even rung yet. Even if it had, I would have turned it off at once, and it was still some time before mom would send my sister to drag me out of bed.

"Wake up already."

No! I want to sleep some more. I don't have time for strange dreams.

"I said wake up! Can't you hear me?"

The hands around my neck now shook me ceaselessly. I finally opened my eyes when I felt the back of my head banging against the hard floor.

Hard floor?

I sat upright, looking confused. Haruhi was looking down at me and backed off to avoid bumping our heads together.

"You finally awake?"

Kneeling beside me was Haruhi in her sailor uniform. Her white face displayed an expression of anxiety.

“Do you know where this is?”

Of course I do; we’re at North High, the school we go to, and right now we’re at the staircase ahead of the shoe lockers by the school entrance. There were no lights on, and the school at night appeared gray before us……

No, something’s wrong.

There was no night sky above.

Just a wide gray horizon. A monotonous sky. There was no moon or stars, not even a single cloud. Only a sky as gray as the concrete walls.

The world is covered in silence and darkness.

This is a Sealed Reality.

I slowly got up. I was amazed that I was not wearing my pajamas, but my school uniform.

“When I woke up, I found myself here, then you by my side. What’s going on here? Why’re we at school?”

Haruhi asked in an abnormally soft voice. I didn’t answer her at once, instead reaching my arms out to feel my way. From the pain of pinching the back of my hand, to the feel of my uniform on my body, it didn’t feel like a dream. I pulled two of my hairs out. I found out that really hurts.

“Haruhi, are we the only ones here?”

“Yeah, I was supposed to be asleep under my blanket. Why did we appear here? And the sky looks strange……”

“Have you seen Koizumi?”

“No……why’d you mention him?”

“Nothing, just asking.”

If this Sealed Reality was created by a quake in the dimensional faultline or by external factors, there ought to be a glowing giant and Koizumi in here as well.

“Anyway, let’s leave the school now! Maybe we’ll run into someone.”

“How come you don’t look anxious at all?”

I am most certainly anxious, especially seeing that you're here as well. Isn't this a playground for the giants you create? Or am I being oversensitive and just dreaming all of this? All alone with Haruhi in an empty Reality……If Sigmund Freud were here, he could have analyzed all this for me!

I remained at a distance from Haruhi as we walked towards the school entrance, when we were blocked by an invisible wall. I still remember the elastic feel of this wall. It could be pushed inwards a bit, but soon after, another harder wall would block any attempts to penetrate further.

"……What is this?"

Haruhi reached her arms out and tried to push this invisible wall, while asking with her eyes wide open. I walked along the track field and traced the wall.

It seems that we're trapped inside the school.

"There doesn't seem to be a way out of the school."

I couldn't feel any breeze. It was as though even the air had stopped flowing.

"Let's try the back entrance!"

"Oh yeah, is there any way we can contact anyone? Let's look for a phone. I didn't bring my cell phone."

If this was the Sealed Reality Koizumi told me about, then finding a phone would be useless. Despite that, we still decided to go inside the school building to have a look. There should be a phone in the staff room.

The school looked eerie in the dark with all the lights off. We passed by the shoe lockers and silently entered the school building. Along the way, we turned on the lights for the first floor, and the ceiling lamps lit up at once. Even though they were cold, artificial lights, they were enough to elicit a sigh of relief from me and Haruhi.

After making sure there was no one in the classrooms on that floor, we headed to the staff room. Naturally, the staff room was locked, so I picked up a nearby fire extinguisher, smashed the window open, and entered through there.

"……Doesn't seem to work."

Haruhi held the phone to her ear, but could hear nothing. She tried to dial some numbers, but nothing came of it.

We left the staff room, turning on all the lamps along the way, and went up the stairs, since Haruhi had suggested we return to our classroom. As the Fifth Class room for first years was located at the top floor, maybe we could figure out something by looking down from above.

Haruhi kept holding onto my jacket as we walked along the corridor. Don't count on me; I don't have any supernatural powers at all. If you're that scared, then grab onto my arm! It looks more natural that way!

"Idiot!"

Haruhi scowled at me, but her fingers never let go of my jacket.

There was no change in the Fifth Class room; it was just as we'd left it after school.

"……Kyon, look……"

Haruhi went silent after walking towards the windows. I walked to her side and looked down at the situation.

All around was a deep gray world. Looking down from the fourth floor at the top of the hill, I could even see the horizon beyond the shore. It was all darkness within the panorama, without even a single light on. It was like the end of the world.

"What is this place……"

It wasn't the whole population that disappeared, but rather, we who had disappeared. It seemed that we had stumbled onto this Sealed Reality by accident.

"This feels strange."

Haruhi touched her shoulder and murmured.

As we didn't know where else to go, we returned to the club room where we had just spent the afternoon before. As I'd already stolen the keys from the staff room, we were able to unlock the door and enter.

Both of us breathed a sigh of relief at returning to a familiar, well-lit room.

We turned on the radio, but we couldn't even hear any static. The club room was so quiet that only the sound of me pouring tea could be heard. I'm not that interested in changing tea leaves, so I brewed the tea using thoroughly overused and tasteless tea leaves. Haruhi stood beside me gazing vividly at the gray world outside.

"You want some tea?"

"No."

I took my teacup, pulled out a chair, and sat down. I took a sip. Sigh, the tea brewed by Asahina-san is so much better than this.

“Just what is going on here!? I don’t get it! What is this place? Why am I here?”

Haruhi stood by the window and faced outside; her silhouette looked very frail.

“And why am I with you, of all people?”

“How the hell should I know!?”

Haruhi just flicked her hair and scowled at my response.

“I’m going outside to have a look.” She said and proceeded to leave the room. Just as I was about to stand up as well……

“You stay here, I’ll be right back.”

She left the room right away after saying that. That is so like Haruhi to do that! While hearing Haruhi’s energetic footsteps disappearing and sipping my tasteless warm tea, that thing appeared.

It was a small glowing red sphere. At first it was the size of a table tennis ball, then slowly the sphere grew larger, shining like a firefly before finally taking on a humanoid shape.

“Koizumi, is that you?”

Before me was a glowing humanoid, but I could not see Koizumi’s appearance clearly, including his eyes, nose, and mouth.

“Hi there.” A relaxed voice came from within the glowing object.

“Took you long enough! I thought you would appear in your human form……”

“Things are getting a bit complicated, so it’s going to take some time to explain. I’ll be honest; this is an abnormal event!” The red light flickered a bit. “If it were a normal Sealed Reality, I could have penetrated easily, but not this time. I had to appear in this incomplete form, and as I needed some help from my companions before I could finally enter here, I can’t even remain in this state for too long. Our powers are disappearing slowly, even as we speak.”

“Just what’s going on? Is it just me and Haruhi here?”

“Yes,” Koizumi answered.

“This means what we had feared is finally happening. Suzumiya-san has grown tired of this reality, and she has decided to create a new one.”

"……"

"Our superiors are now in total panic. No one knows what the world will become when its god has disappeared. Though it's possible the world will survive as long as Suzumiya-san decides to have mercy upon it, it is also possible that it'll vanish in an instant."

"What are you trying to say……?"

"To put it simply," the red light now flickered like a flame, "You and Suzumiya-san have now disappeared from our world. This world is not a Sealed Reality but rather a brand new reality created by Suzumiya-san. The Sealed Realities we've seen before were probably just drills before she decided to re-create the world for real."

Such an interesting joke, but I don't know how to laugh now. Ha ha ha.

"I'm not joking. This world is probably closest to the world which Suzumiya-san desires. We're still not sure what kind of world she desires, but we should have an answer to that soon."

"Let's leave that aside, the real problem is why am I here?"

"Do you really not know? You are the person chosen by Suzumiya-san. You are the only person in our world that Suzumiya-san wants to be with. I thought you'd have discovered that by now." The light around Koizumi now glimmered like a torch running out of batteries, its brightness clearly diminishing. "I'm close to my limit now. At this rate, I'll never be able to see you again; on the other hand though, I'm kind of relieved since I no longer have to go hunting for those Avatars anymore."

"Must I live alone with Haruhi in such a gray world?"

"In this world, you're like Adam and Eve. Just work hard on re-populating the world, and it'll be fine."

"……I'm so gonna beat the crap out of you."

"Just kidding! Right now this sealed state is probably only temporary, but very soon it'll become similar to the world you know. Yet this world will be completely different from the world we're from. As of right now, this world could be considered as the real world, while the original reality ought to be considered a Sealed Reality. As for what differences there are between these two worlds, unfortunately we do not know. If I'm fortunate enough to be reborn in the new reality, I'm counting on you to show me around."

At this moment, Koizumi the glowing humanoid object began to slowly disintegrate and then, like a star running out of fuel, now shrank to its original table tennis ball size.

"Is it impossible for us to return to the original world?"

“As long as Suzumiya-san wishes for it, it might still be possible. I only knew you for a short while; it’s a pity really, but I did enjoy my time with the SOS Brigade……Ah, yes, I nearly forgot, I have to relay both Asahina Mikuru and Nagato Yuki’s messages to you.”

Before Koizumi disappeared completely, he left this message.

“Asahina Mikuru asked me to apologize in her stead: she said, ‘I’m sorry, it’s all my fault.’ Also, Nagato Yuki tells you to ‘Remember to turn on the computer.’”

After the message, he vanished like a candle flame blown out by the wind.

I don’t know why Asahina-san had to apologize to me. Had Asahina-san done something wrong to me? But I decided not to think about that now; rather, I followed Nagato’s request and switched on the computer. After the hard disk makes a beep sound, the OS trademark should start appearing on the screen……That’s strange, why is nothing being shown? The OS screen which was supposed to appear after a few seconds didn’t appear; the screen was pitch black with only a white typing cursor flashing in the upper left corner of the screen. Then, the cursor started moving silently, and a line of cold words appeared.

YUKI.N > Can you read this?

I was stunned for a moment, and then I pulled the keyboard closer and started typing.

‘Yes.’

YUKI.N > Right now I have not completely lost contact with the world you are in. But that is only a matter of time, since the disconnection should occur very soon. If that is true, this will be our final conversation.

‘What should I do?’

YUKI.N > I do not know either. The abnormal data spurt has disappeared completely over here. The Integrated Data Sentient Entity is very disappointed with this, because they will lose the possibility to evolve.

‘What do you mean by the possibility to evolve? Just how is Haruhi evolving?’

YUKI.N > Being highly sentient means being able to process data quickly and accurately. Sentient organic lifeforms are limited by the excessive inaccurate and mixed-up data streams caused by their physical bodies, and are unable to process data quickly and accurately. So after evolving to a certain stage, organic lifeforms will cease to evolve.

‘Is it possible to evolve even without a physical body?’

YUKI.N > The Integrated Data Sentient Entity is also created from data. They too had believed that their ability to process data would increase infinitely until the universe overheated itself. But

they were wrong. As with the universe having an edge, their evolution also has a limit, at least for sentient entities relying on data to survive.

‘What about Suzumiya?’

YUKI.N > Suzumiya Haruhi possesses the ability to create massive amounts of data out of nothing. That is the ability that the Integrated Data Sentient Entity doesn’t have. She can release data that could never be processed by a human, a mere organic lifeform, in its lifetime. The Integrated Data Sentient Entity believes if this data-creating ability is analyzed, then they will be able to find clues to how to auto-evolve.

The cursor flashed momentarily. Perhaps Nagato was hesitating on what words to use. The next second, the words flowed like water.

YUKI.N > I’m betting everything on you.

‘Betting on me for what?’

YUKI.N > I hope that you can both return to this world. Suzumiya Haruhi is an important observation target, an important treasure that might only appear once in this universe. Besides that, I myself also wish for you to return.

The color of the words began to fade as the electricity supply got weaker. The cursor continued to type out words.

YUKI.N > Let us go to the library again next time.

The words grew darker; even trying to adjust the screen brightness didn’t help. Finally, Nagato typed the following two words.

YUKI.N > sleeping beauty

Brrr. The sound of the hard disk spinning had me jumping from my seat. The light on the CPU flickered, and the familiar OS trademark screen appeared. The sound of the computer fan spinning was all that could be heard in this world.

“What should I do? Koizumi! Nagato!”

I sighed deeply and turned my head despondently towards the window.

A blue light shone from outside the window.

A glowing giant now stood in the school courtyard. Because it was so close, it looked like a huge blue wall.

Haruhi rushed into the room.

“Kyon! Something’s appeared!”

Haruhi saw that she was about to bump into me, who was standing by the window, and quickly stopped and stood beside me.

“What is that? It’s huge! Is it a monster? It doesn’t seem like an illusion.”

Haruhi sounded very excited. Her depressed anxiety from a while ago had disappeared. Right now, her eyes glimmered with enthusiasm. No fear could be found in them.

“You think that’s an alien? Or it could be a superweapon created by the ancients, waking up from its long slumber? Is that thing the reason we can’t escape from school?”

The blue wall moved. The image of the giant smashing the buildings with ease flashed through my mind. I hurriedly grabbed Haruhi’s hand and bolted out of the club room.

“Wait! Wait up, what’re you doing!?”

As we rushed to the corridor, nearly falling down, a loud tremor vibrated through the air; I quickly pushed Haruhi down onto the floor and shielded her with my body. The clubs complex shook violently. The sound and vibration of a hard, heavy object stomping on the ground was transmitted to my ears. From this I knew the giant’s target was not the clubs complex but rather the school complex opposite.

I grabbed Haruhi, who was so shocked that her mouth opened and closed like a goldfish, and started running. Amazingly, Haruhi obediently followed me and ran.

My palms were getting sweaty. So were Haruhi’s.

The old clubs complex was devoid of dust. With all my strength, I ran with Haruhi in tow towards the staircase. The sound of the giant causing more destruction could be heard.

I ran down the stairs while feeling Haruhi’s body heat being transmitted between our palms. After crossing the courtyard, we headed past the slope and towards the trackfield. At this moment I took a quick glance at Haruhi. I might have been mistaken, but she seemed quite happy. It was like seeing a child waking up on Christmas morning and finding out the presents she had wanted all along were now by her bedside.

After running quite a distance from the school buildings, we turned and looked upwards, and discovered how huge the giant was. The giant inside the Sealed Reality Koizumi showed me was just as huge as this, almost as tall as a building.

The giant waved its hand, and the school building collapsed. As the four story complex was already ripped open from its previous strike, it now fell easily. The debris fell and scattered in all directions along with the deafening noise it created.

We ran frantically to the center of the two hundred meter trackfield before stopping. An unbelievable blue giant has now appeared in the dark monotonous school.

If you want to take pictures, you should be taking these, and not pictures of the president of the Computer Study Group groping Asahina-san's breasts, and definitely not pictures of Asahina-san wearing all sorts of costumes. The website ought to have pictures like what we're seeing now!

As I was thinking about this, Haruhi quickly said in my ear,

"Do you think he'll attack us? I don't think he's evil at all, what do you think?"

"I dunno."

As I answered Haruhi, I was thinking at the same time about what Koizumi told me when he brought me into that Sealed Reality. If we let these "Avatars" continue their rampage, then after the destruction, the Sealed Reality will replace the real world, meaning this gray world will replace the world we came from, and then……

What will become of our world?

According to what Koizumi just told me, Haruhi seems to be creating a brand new world. Will the Asahina and Nagato I know be in this new world? Or will it be a surreal world where these "Avatars" walk around freely, and aliens, time travelers, and espers become commonplace?

If the world really becomes like that, what role will I be playing?

Argh, forget it, it's useless trying to think anymore, because I just don't get it. I don't get what Haruhi's thinking, and I don't possess any telepathic power that allows me to read what others think.

At this instant, I heard Haruhi speaking to me,

"What exactly is going on here? Whether it's this world or that giant, it's all very strange!"

Those things were all created by you, missy! I should be the one asking, why'd you drag me into all of this!? What Adam and Eve? That is just stupid! I won't believe in such a crappy story! Never!

"Don't you want to return to the original world?"

I asked calmly.

“What did you say?”

Haruhi turned towards me. Her face was smoothly white even in this gray world, and her glimmering eyes were now shrouded in darkness.

“We can’t just stay here forever! There’s not a single shop, so there’s nowhere to eat when we get hungry. Besides, the school’s surrounded by an invisible wall: there’s no way out of here. At this rate we’ll starve to death.”

“Hmm, it is all strange, but I don’t care. Things will eventually get sorted out. For some reason, I just feel very happy.”

“Then what about the SOS Brigade? You created that club! You’re just gonna leave it?”

“I really don’t give a damn anymore, because I’m already experiencing something exciting now; there’s no need for me to go out and search for mysterious events.”

“But, I want to return to the original world.”

The giant momentarily stopped its demolition of the school.

“Before we ended up in this strange situation, I didn’t realize how much I liked my life the way it was. There I have the idiot Taniguchi, Kunikida, Koizumi, Nagato, and Asahina-san, and even the long-vanished Asakura.”

“……What are you talking about?”

“I really want to see those friends again. I have many things I want to tell them.”

Haruhi lowered her head, and then continued after a while,

“We’ll see them; this world won’t be forever covered in darkness. Once morning comes, the sun will come up. I’m sure of that.”

“It’s not like that. This world is not what you think it is. I really want to see those friends in the original world.”

“I don’t get what you’re talking about.”

Haruhi scowled at me, like a kid who’s had her treasured present snatched away, revealing her anger and sadness.

“Aren’t you sick and tired of that boring world as well? That world is so normal that there’s nothing special at all. Don’t you want to experience something interesting as well?”

“I used to think like that.”

The giant started moving. He kicked off the remaining parts of the school complex and headed for the courtyard. On the way, he swiped at the school corridor with his arm, then gave the clubs complex a huge kick. The school is slowly being flattened, including our club room.

I looked over Haruhi's shoulder and was astonished to find other glowing blue walls around. One, two, three……when I got to five, I decided to give up counting.

Without the red glowing spheres in the way, the glowing blue giants now began their destruction of this gray world without delay. I don't get what's so interesting about all this destruction. Every time they moved their arms and legs, everything that they touched disappeared instantly.

Moments later, half the school was gone.

I couldn't tell how large this Sealed Reality was, and I didn't know if this dimension would expand and become another reality. At this moment, my mind was full of uncertainty. If at this instant, an old drunkard sitting beside me in a train had said to me, "Let me tell you something, but don't tell anyone! I'm actually an alien," I would have believed him right away. Because the number of mysterious events I've experienced has now tripled compared to a month ago.

What exactly could I do? If it were a month ago maybe I wouldn't have thought of anything, but right now I believed I could. Because I've already received a few hints.

Once I'd decided, I said the following,

"Haruhi, these last few days, I've gone through some very interesting things. Though you may not know it, there are all sorts of people who are very concerned about you. It's not ridiculous to say that the world literally revolves around you. Everyone believes you are a very special person, and they've tried to back up those beliefs with actions. You may not know it, but the world is headed in a very interesting direction."

As I grabbed onto Haruhi's shoulders, I realized I was still holding her hand, while Haruhi looked at me with a face that said, "What's gotten into you?"

And then, she moved her eyes away from me and towards the rampaging blue giants, with a matter-of-fact expression.

Looking at her young and smooth face, I remembered Nagato's "evolution possibility", Asahina-san's "temporal distortion", and Koizumi treating Haruhi as "God". But as for me, what is Haruhi to me? Just what do I treat her as?

Haruhi is Haruhi, what else is there to say? I didn't intend to just answer like that though. Yet, I didn't have a definite answer. I knew it'd come to this, right? If you had pointed at the classmate behind me and asked, "What does she represent to you?" - how do you think I would answer? ……This, I'm sorry. I'm going in circles again! To me, Haruhi's not just an ordinary classmate, and certainly not any "evolution possibility", "temporal distortion" or even "God".

The giant turned towards the trackfield. He's not supposed to have any eyes, yet I could vividly feel his vision. He took one step in our direction. His single step was most likely a couple of meters, or he wouldn't have shortened the distance between us so quickly despite walking so slowly!

I got it! Didn't Asahina-san say something about it? That prophecy! And Nagato's last message. Snow White and Sleeping Beauty. Please, even I know what Sleeping Beauty means! What is the similarity between these two stories? In our dire situation, the answer was practically shouting out loud.

Man, this is so lame.

It's way too lame! Asahina-san, Nagato. I'll never accept such a development! Never!

My rationality insisted on that. But humans were never a lifeform that relied only on reason to survive. Maybe they needed a bit of what Nagato called "mixed-up data". I let go of Haruhi's hand, grabbed her shoulder, and turned her towards me.

"What now……"

"You know, I really like you in a ponytail."

"What?"

"I don't know when, but since then, I can't stop thinking of you in a ponytail. I think that suits you best."

"What're you trying to pull?"

Her black eyes resisted me. I ignored Haruhi's protests and kissed her on the lips. It's more polite to close your eyes at times like this, so I closed mine. And so, I didn't know what expression Haruhi had. Were her eyes open from the shock? Or did she close her eyes as well? Or did she try to raise her hand and slap me? But even if she did slap me it didn't matter, since I was betting everything on this. If anyone else did this to Haruhi, they would know how I felt then. I grabbed her hand and held on tightly, not wanting to let go yet.

I could still hear the rumbling in the distance; it seemed the giant was still destroying the campus. Just as I was thinking that, I suddenly lost my balance and fell downwards, and then everything turned upside down. There was a hard impact upon my left side. No matter what I did, I couldn't keep my balance. When I tried to sit up and open my eyes, I saw a familiar ceiling above my head and was stunned.

I was in my room, and turning around, I realized I had fallen out of bed onto the floor. Of course, I was wearing my pajamas. Half of the messed-up blanket lay on the floor. I placed my hand behind my back, opening my mouth like an idiot.

It was some time before I could think again.

Under a half dreamlike state, I slowly stood up, opened the window, and looked outside. I saw a few twinkling stars and the shining street lamps. I confirmed there were lights coming from other people's windows and occasional silhouettes moving behind them.

Was it a dream? Had I been dreaming all of this?

I had a dream where I fell into a surreal world with a girl I knew, and then ended up kissing her! A dream so easy to understand that even Sigmund Freud would laugh out loud.

Urgh, I really wanted to hang myself right away.

Maybe I should be grateful that this country has outlawed guns, or I would've grabbed a fully automatic gun and aimed it at my head without hesitation. If it were with Asahina, then I could have at least gotten some sort of well-detailed personality analysis from this dream, but I had to dream of myself kissing Haruhi, of all people! What on earth was my subconscious thinking!?

I sat wearily on the floor and held my head, thinking if this were all a dream, why did it feel so real? The sweaty right hand, and the warmth left on my lips……

……Does this…does this mean that this is no longer the original world? Is this a brand new world created by Haruhi? Is there a way for me to confirm this?

There isn't, no matter how hard I thought. Or rather, I never wanted to think about such a problem. If I had to admit that all of that was a dream because my brain was out of order, then I'd rather believe that the world had been destroyed. Besides, right now I'm in denial.

I looked at my alarm clock. Two thirty in the morning.

……I'm going back to sleep.

I pulled my blanket over my head, asking my already clear mind to give me some deep sleep.

I couldn't sleep.

That's why right now I'm so exhausted that I almost need to crawl in order to climb up the slope. This is killing me, to be honest. I'm just glad I didn't meet Taniguchi on the way, or I'd be forced to hear him go on and on. The sun continued to release the heat from its endless nuclear fusion. Mr. Sunshine, I beg of you, can't you occasionally take a break? I'm going to fry to death!

Refusing to come when I needed it, the sleep demon now circled around my head when I least wanted it. If this goes on, I don't know how long I can stay awake in the first class.

When I saw the school complex, I stopped and looked at the crummy old four story building. The sweaty students all crawled into the school buildings like a bunch of ants.

I dragged my feet up the stairs, and then into the familiar first year Fifth Class room, stopping three steps from the window.

There, sitting in the back by the window, I saw the back of Haruhi's head. How should I say this? She had her chin resting on her hands as usual and stared outside with a wooden expression.

From her back, I could see a small tail hanging from her hair onto her shoulder. Her hair was a bit too short now to tie a ponytail, so I guess she only tied that randomly?

"Yo, how's it been?"

I placed my bag on the desk.

"Miserable! I just had a terrible nightmare last night."

Haruhi said in a calm tone. Hey, you actually just went through a really incredible event last night!

"That's why I couldn't sleep all night. I wanted to take sick leave, but then my attendance rate would have gotten too low."

"I see."

I sat down on the hard chair and studied Haruhi's face. Her hair covered the side of her face from her ear downwards, so I couldn't clearly see her expression. In any case, she was in a bad mood. At least her face told me so.

"Say, Haruhi."

"What?"

I said to Haruhi, whose eyes were still staring outside,

"You look great in that ponytail."

Author's notes

Sometimes, I wonder if the total amount of words one can write has been decided since birth. If everyone has a set amount of words to write in their lifetime, then their writing volume will decrease as they grow older. Once I think of that, I'd lose the will to write, and concentrate on calculation. For example, I aim to write a draft of about 300 pages with 400 words on each page, but the best answer is that it just doesn't seem possible to achieve. Even if I write a 120,000 word story a day, and on average I type one word per second, then it'll take me at least 33 hours to complete; that is of course, impossible for me. Perhaps there's someone who can do it? But I can't prove if that person exists.

Since I don't know what else to say, let's change the subject! Really, cats are wonderful animals; they're adorable, lazy, and they meow. Though it can be a headache wondering just what they're up to, I don't intend to defend their actions. As long as people think that cats are adorable, that'll do for me.

Let's talk about something else again. I never thought I would win a prize with this book. I'm really surprised, actually. When I received the phone call notifying me of the result, at first I wondered if I'd heard correctly. Then I wondered if I was going insane, and then I questioned whether the phone was working properly, doubting reality, and wondering if the world had stopped spinning.

Finally, when I thought "this seems real after all", I found myself grabbing my cat's legs and spinning ecstatically. I even got scratched a few times. As I looked at the scars on my hand, I thought, "If some people are fated to have good luck, then I've probably used up all my good luck by now." Anyway, I was so mentally shocked that parts of my memory have now been lost, so I can't remember the details, but it should be something like that.

I believe the publishers and editors who worked long hours to get this book published probably had a harder time than me as an author. Right now I can't think of any words to express my gratitude to them. I don't know how to express my gratefulness, especially to the judges. Right now I'm still trying to find a new word to describe my thankfulness, but I believe it would be a newly created word that no one would understand. Anyway, I thank everyone from the bottom of my heart.

Right now I'm standing on a brand new starting line. Maybe I'll trip and fall at the sound of the gunshot. I don't even know where the track will lead me, if it even has an end, or whether I get to take a break and drink some water along the way, but I do hope to finish this long and arduous journey. Now is not the time to talk about this in a relaxed manner!

Finally, I would like to thank everyone involved in the editing and publishing of this book, and every reader who has read this book has my endless gratitude. That's it for now!

—Tanigawa Nagaru

Editor's notes

This title, "The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi" has been awarded the Taisho Prize at the 8th Annual Sneaker Awards. This award is created to encourage budding writers, and since its establishment it has served to launch the careers of many writers.

So far only two people have earned the most prestigious Taisho Prize. That includes Yoshida Sunao in the 2nd awards (1996, "Genocide Angel") and Yasui Kentarou in the 3rd awards (1997, "Ragnarok"). As most would know, these two are now authors of some of the most popular series (Yoshida: Trinity Blood series, Yasui: Ragnarok series), and are still currently active.

In other words, one needs to be of the same caliber as these two writers, or even better than them, in order to be awarded the Taisho Prize. That is why the selection process is very strict. Right now another exceptional writer has appeared since Yasui Kentarou to win this prestigious honor, his first award in only his fifth year as a writer: Tanigawa Nagaru's "The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi".

Every year in the Final Sneaker Taisho Selection Committee, many committee judges have fervently expressed their opinions on each work. Each judge goes through the selection process with the aim of "finding talent for the world to enjoy", but they will not award the Taisho Prize to any author who has not met the stringent requirements of such an honor.

Let us describe the selection process here. First, the judges discuss the pros and cons of the selected title. Based on these pros and cons, each judge determines where the appeal of the title lies to decide whether the title should be awarded the prize. During the presentation, the editors try and neutralize the cons to further emphasize the pros in order to show the connection between the title and its author.

The Final Selection Committee was unanimous in the awarding of the title to "The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi". Using Suzumiya Haruhi, an unorthodox dynamic character, as the main pivot of the story, and told in a first person narrative, the reader is able to finish the story from start to finish in one go. Such a writing style, along with a wide cast of interesting characters, all led the judges to agree collectively that this title should be awarded with the Taisho Prize.

This is a high school drama about the antics of the eccentric beauty Suzumiya Haruhi, yet the story has successfully included a hidden plot that not even the title character Haruhi herself knows of. As to what secret that is, we'll let the reader find out, but as the reader is exposed to the unbelievable developments, they will have already indulged themselves in Haruhi's interesting world. This is the most appealing and amazing aspect of this title. Please enjoy the mixed-up reality of this work and the wonderful feeling that what should be abnormal is actually normal in the book.

On the other hand, each character has their unique characteristics that stand out clearly. The selfish, self-centered, and eccentric protagonist Suzumiya Haruhi has her never-give-up attitude in search of things that she believes to be interesting. She is either a very positive girl or a very annoying girl. Being turned around in circles by Haruhi is the narrator Kyon, whose true name is

still not revealed yet. He's always dragged into all sorts of troubles by Haruhi, yet he is amazing to still be able to get along with her.

Then there is Asahina Mikuru, who always gets forced to cosplay in all sorts of costumes. She may be saying no all the time, but perhaps she secretly enjoys cosplaying. During serialization, the author experimented with all sorts of costumes for her.

At the time of publishing, the author has begun a series of short stories in Sneaker magazine. The stories take place after the events in this book. The selfish Haruhi, the cosplaying Asahina, and the ever sarcastic Kyon are still very active at the moment.

If you liked "The Melancholy of Suzumiya Haruhi" after reading it, then please do recommend it to your friends and relatives, and please do look forward to the author's serialization in Sneaker magazine. The greatest wish of the author and editors is to let more people know about this wonderful story.

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